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Mizoguchi's *My Love Has Been Burning*: The only scenes that work are those in which women are degraded

Japanese Sexual Politics

Amy Taubin

My Love Has Been Burning
Cinema Studio 2 (Opens Jan. 5)

This is the first American release for *My Love Has Been Burning*, a 1949 film by Kenji Mizoguchi, one of the great Japanese directors. While this is not a major Mizoguchi work, it has a particular interest to feminists

The film is set in the 1880s, about 15 years after the Meiji Restoration which rejected feudalism in favor of Westernization and modernization. Eiko Hirayama, the heroine of the film, is a school teacher in Okayama. Inspired by a feminist, she leaves her parents house to study in Tokyo where she meets Omoi, the leader of the liberal party, and begins to work for him. Omoi becomes her lover. The two get involved with a group of farmers protesting the exploitation of women who are slaves in a mill. Eiko sees one of the women — Chiyo, the daughter of her family's servants — being raped. Chiyo sets fire to the mill and is arrested, along with Eiko and Omoi. In prison, Eiko tries to befriend the pregnant Chiyo, but Chiyo confesses that she is in love with the man who was her first owner, because "he made her a woman."

When a new constitution is granted by the emperor, political prisoners — including Omoi, Eiko and Chiyo — are given amnesty. (But the constitution makes no mention of rights for women.) Omoi, Eiko and Chiyo are released from prison; Eiko marries Omoi and takes Chiyo into her house. Shortly after Omoi is elected to Parliament, Eiko discovers that he has taken Chiyo as his mistress. When she confronts them, Omoi tells her not to be troubled because Chiyo is "only a vile woman, a mistress." Eiko, shocked not so much by his infidelity as by his attitude toward women, leaves him. She returns to her hometown to set up a school to promote women's rights through education. As she travels on the train, she hears people praising Omoi and the achievements of the liberal party. Suddenly Chiyo appears; she finally understands what Eiko is doing, and asks to go with her.

Mizoguchi is considered a strongly pro-feminist director. In this film, his political analysis of the position of women is more

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explicit and more radical than in any of his other work. It is the position of the most radical feminists today: that the liberation of woman must be the primary concern of any radical movement, that women must not allow their struggle to be co-opted by other struggles, that it is extremely difficult for men to overcome their sexism and that women must not be deceived by male pro-feminist rhetoric into giving up their priorities.

Perhaps because the feminist statement is so strong in this film, the contradiction that I have always found in Mizoguchi's work is also obvious. Like those of Jean-Luc Godard's, many of Mizoguchi's heroines are prostitutes. You can argue that the oppression of women, their status as commodities, can be demonstrated most clearly by presenting them as prostitutes — or slaves or geishas. But it has always appeared to me that Mizoguchi and his audience derive a voyeuristic gratification from the scenes in which women are degraded, and that there is a certain amount of sadism involved in his feminist-supporter stance.

In *My Love Has Been Burning*, the only scenes that are involving are the scenes of Chiyo's rape, Omoi's humiliation of both

women and the last scene on the train when Eiko continues to read her book as she listens to people praising her ex-husband. For the rest of the film, Eiko and the others act like puppets. And it is clear that Mizoguchi is not purposely having them behave like puppets — as a distancing device as in a Brechtian learning-play. He is making a realistic film. But he does not invest any of the scenes where Eiko is acting positively with any detail or any energy.

This is a risky speculation to make on one viewing of a film. It is hard to separate what is actually present in the film from what is in the conditioning and expectation of the viewer. Is the filmmaking really better in the scene in which the women are hurt and humiliated, or is sadism toward women something that we find so gratifying to watch that it involves us regardless of the quality of the filmmaking? If the latter is true, to what extent is the voyeuristic pleasure we take in these scenes conditioned by the expectations that years of film viewing have produced, and to what degree is it basic to film viewing experience? These are questions raised, but not answered, by *My Love Has Been Burning* and for this alone, the film is essential viewing for anyone interested in a feminist cinema.