

***Rashomon* and the Suffering of Veterans after World War II**

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Being used to watch films being omniscient, I am intrigued when I first watched *Rashomon* and felt challenged by having to guess the “truth”. The film itself has a straightforward plot: a woodcutter, a priest and a commoner recalled four contradicting testimonies of an incident involving a bandit, a samurai and his wife. I tried to weave out the truth from details or commonalities of the four but soon I realized the meaning of this movie is beyond simply knowing what happened. *Rashomon* is filmed five years after the end of World War II and it’s easy to relate the dilapidated Rashomon Gate or the raped wife with the war-torn Japan. However, just finishing reading Christopher Browning’s book on Germany Police Reserve Battalion in which claim, upon watching the film, I am drawn more to the film’s reflection on the suffering of “ordinary men”¹ – soldiers who were just civilians – after the war. My interpretation is that through the lenses of a simple incident, *Rashomon* points out the absence of absolute truth due to human selfishness and the agony of soldiers as the closest observer, participants and choice maker in the context of WW2.

There exists observers and participants in the movie as well. As observers of chaotic incidents – the second world war and the death of the samurai, war veterans and the priest, woodcutter alike felt confusion and loss of faith towards humanity. The director Kurosawa shows the distortion of humanity by using visual elements as well as actor’s lines. Towards the end, audiences are let to observe the three people through some tilted pillars in contrasting to the long-distance shoots with upright pillars. This particular choice of camera location conveys the

transition from seeing the world as kind and trustworthy to crooked and distorted. Adding on to that, the priest saying, “If we don't trust each other, this earth might as well be hell” and the repeated lines like “I don't understand”² revealed the observers' recurring confusion and fear towards the selfish and harsh reality presented in front of them. Having witness the bloodshed, the killings and the brutality of modern warfare where all virtues and decency are destroyed, veterans who are nothing more than trained civilians, possibly even trained woodcutters is suffering the same destructive mental effect as characters in *Rashomon*. PTSD or battle fatigue becomes a mental disease that WW2 veterans often developed, regardless of their nationality.

The other character group is the participants of the incidents, namely the bandit, the samurai and the samurai's wife, whom shared commonality of trying to justify their actions in their individual “truth” with soldiers. They each, together with the woodcutter, provides conflicting accounts of the incidents. In their personal testimony, they themselves are glorified and justified with righteous reasons. For example, in Tajomaru's story, the wife after attacking the bandit fiercely is overpowered by him and picks fight between him and her husband. He and the samurai crossed sword for 23 times and killed the samurai in this honorable battle. If the audiences are only provided with Tajomaru's perspective, they would portray him as a bandit with dignity and integrity but with the woodcutter's tale, they will arrive at a different set of conclusions. When the audience want to rely on the testimony from the woodcutter who is seemingly the most innocent of all, for the truth, it turns out that even he is hiding the fact of stealing the precious dagger. The absolute truth is thus lost due to people's selfish nature to make themselves be perceived better. Similarly, in the unsettling situation like war, when the soldiers were asked to carry out inhumane missions. They desperately need to find some justification for themselves for having to do something ugly in nature. It implies that whoever wins gets to write

the history and the story of the winning side will be regarded as the truth. However, despite the differences in the four stories, the death of the samurai and the rape of the wife can not be undone. This setting implies that even an event's story can be altered due to people's perspective, its effect remained valid no matter what.

With an additional note, the movie *Rashomon* addressed the importance of choice at its very end, which is equally important for soldiers during war. The movie is pushed to a climax with the appearance of the baby, which later leads to a dichotomy of choices. The commoner choose to take away the only two things – the amulet and the kimono – left to the baby, dragging the audience into the abyss of despair. But when the woodcutter choose to adopt the baby, it shows a glimpse of hope and humanity. Just as the priest noted: “I think I can keep my faith in man.”³ Faced with cruel and unreasonable orders comes from the top, soldiers suffer form dilemma of obeying orders and preserving their own humanity. This is very common choice soldiers need to make during WW2, particularly in Germany. When Nazi officers are asked to carry out genocidal massacre on the Jews, there are people who follows orders and who are like Oskar Schindler in *Schindler's list*, risking their life to do the right thing and bring out the shine of humanity.

Kurosawa Akira undoubtedly did a great job in producing *Rashomon*, a film that can evoke many thinking and interpretation. I noticed and studied mainly how soldiers who fought in WW2 related to characters in the movie. Like observers in the movie, soldiers experienced mental destruction caused by the horror of the war. Like participants, they have to lie to themselves in order to get some justification and a moment of peace. Like every ordinary men, they have to make hard choices between obeying the authority or follow our heart.

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1. Christopher R. Browning, *Ordinary Men: Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland*, revised ed. (New York: HarperPerennial, 2017).
 2. Kurosawa, Akira. 1950. *Rashomon*. [Tokyo]: Daiei.
 3. Kurosawa, *Rashomon*.