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Rashomon after the Rain: Judicial Perspective

Shulamit Almog
After the Rain
Dir: Takashi Koizumi, Japan/France, 1999
A Review by Shulamit Almog, Faculty of Law, University of Haifa, Israel

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After the Rain is Takashi Koizumi's feature film debut, made in 1999, Shoji Ueda and Takao Saito as cinematographers. Akira Kurosawa wrote the screenplay, and Takashi Koizumi, who pays the late Japanese master a tribute in this film, attempted to make a film from Kurosawa's script, as he would have wished. The tribute quality of the film manifests itself most eminently when one puts After the Rain alongside Rashomon, Kurosawa's 1950 masterpiece, that is still possibly the best known Japanese film outside Japan. On the face of it, there is not much in common between the sombre, infinitely intriguing Rashomon and the delightful, lighthearted and light flooded After the Rain. In actual fact, there is a delicate web of links and connections between those two articulations, that correspond with each other.

In both films most characters participate in several forms of judging, formal and informal, external and internal. They all judge and are being judged, cast adjudication and are subjected to it. In Rashomon a formal trial is depicted, alongside the internal ones. In After the Rain there is no formal trial, but all characters involved perform continuous ethical judgments of themselves and others.

Rashomon begins in rain and ends with rain. Three people, who find shelter from the rain under the Rashomon gate, engage in narration. Two crimes -- a murder of a Samurai and rape of his wife -- are presented four times, in four different ways. The people at the gate renarrate the story of the formal judgment, where the different versions were first narrated, and, while doing so, judge the narrators, the characters of the narrative, and themselves. The telling and retelling is actually judging, appealing and judging again. Rashomon ends with an abandoned baby adopted, which is a sort of final adjudication that represents perhaps the affirmation of humanity, or a kind of 'life is good, after all' verdict. But this verdict, in Rashomon,
seems artificial and hardly convincing or plausible in the light of the grim, embittered narrative which precedes it.

*After the Rain* is another discussion of the same crux: is life, eventually, good? The verdict is similar to the one offered in *Rashomon*: yes; there is goodness in life. But this time the narrative validates the positive optimistic inclination, and endows it with a moral authority which *Rashomon*'s ending lacks.

As in *Rashomon*, at the beginning of *After the Rain* travelers are forced to find shelter from heavy outpours. This time they gather in a small country inn. Among them are Misawa Ihei, a poor masterless Samurai, and his wife Tayo. As in *Rashomon*, the forced gathering accentuates emotions of cruelty, alienation and hostility. Rice is being stolen from a poor woman; insults and threats are being openly made. But then goodness starts to permeate the tense atmosphere. Ihei takes it upon himself to cheer everyone up by arranging an elaborate feast. To raise money for that, he goes to the local castle and bets against the masters of fencing. This 'prize-fighting' means breaking two fundamental rules. The first is the code of honour of the Samurai that bans this kind of 'honourless' behaviour. The other is the solemn promise he made to his wife not to engage in prize-fighting ever again. However, Ihei decides to disobey his wife and his class in order to achieve harmony in the inn.

This choice makes him subject to several kinds of adjudication. His wife deplores him. The fencing masters of the castle town pass judgments as representatives of the Samurai class, and their verdict (although motivated by their greed and envy) is to deny Ihei the position of master fencer he could otherwise obtain. But eventually, Ihei is acquitted in every meaningful sense. His wife understands the nobility of his actions, and so does Shigeaki, the local lord. However, most importantly, Ihei, who constantly judges himself and his own actions, finds the strength to acquit himself and to find satisfaction in his life. At the end of the narrative he is happy, empowered and at peace with himself and nature.
Both films manifest the human play of struggling and balancing conflicting rules, codes and norms. Personal codes of honour are set against communal and professional codes. Internal moral urges are challenged against external demands. The human condition, as portrayed in both films, is a condition of constant judging. But, as *After the Rain* aptly illustrates, if we are doomed to constantly judge ourselves and others and to be judged by them, our only hope is to approach any judgment equipped with kindness, empathy and creative imagination. This way of judging is represented in *After the Rain* by the women, especially by Tayo, Misawa's wife.

Here lies a significant modification of the standing that may be construed from *Rashomon*. The heroine of *Rashomon* is primarily subjected to the gaze, desire, whims and violence of the male. Although she fights the bandit who rapes her, her brave fight is depicted as originating from the desperate need to remain honourable in the eyes of man, and not from the awful personal damage she suffers. In *Rashomon* the feminine effort to stay honourable and 'loveworthy' under the male gaze is doomed to failure. In a recent reading of *Rashomon*, Orit Kamir suggests that although the woman is cruelly victimised, the film is constructed in a way that makes her a primary defendant, whose guilt is that of being seductive. The woman even judges herself harshly and severely, and eventually convicts herself according to masculine honour norms. (Kamir, 2000: 39)

*After the Rain* is entirely different in this context. From the start, women in *After the Rain* are far from passive and silenced. They have distinct personalities, assertiveness and presence. At the beginning we again meet a victimised woman -- an angry whore who is furious because her meagre portion of food has been stolen. But she bravely overcomes the attempts of the thief to silence her and shame her, and assertively demands her justice. She comes out as a brave and dignified character. She does not accept the derogative judgment some of the men aim to force upon her, and chooses, despite her low starting point, to judge for herself the reality she faces. Both main female characters in the film -- Ihei's wife and the Lord of the castle's wife -- share the same characterisation. They judge rather than being judged.
The way they judge is admirable, because their judging is subtle, sensitive, manifold and compassionate, very different from the crude judgments we witnessed in *Rashomon*, that absolutely failed to make moral sense of reality.

The women in *After the Rain* are portrayed as the carriers of moral authority and compassion, and as capable judges because of their ability to conduct careful balances between conflicting emotions and needs. 'My heart is almost breaking', says Ihei's wife when she reacts to the words of an old man who is persuaded there is goodness in life after meeting Ihei. It is her heart that actually motivates the action and casts the final verdict: there is indeed goodness, which is potent enough to defy poverty, cruelty and whatever else stands in its way.

To sum up this important point, if in *Rashomon* we met a passive, suffocated and highly miserable woman, in *After the Rain* women are strong, wise, self-assured and, perhaps most importantly, authoritative. They take the power to construct their own destiny and the destiny of men. They are the emotional and moral core of the narrative. It is indeed a huge shift from *Rashomon*.

To conclude, both *Rashomon* and *After the Rain* suggest that there are complex, intricate ties between several forms of judging that constitute our life. Alongside formal, legal adjudication operates social and cultural adjudication and also internal-personal processes of self-judgment. Each system of adjudication has its own paths of decision-making and sentencing, but often enough those paths reach juxtaposition and are sometimes interlaced. What characterises the adjudication in *Rashomon* is the elements of desperation, hopelessness, disillusionment, anger and fear that are embedded and must be embedded, according to the spirit of the film, in any act of judging, external or internal, legal or cultural. This is represented, among other ways, in the continuous bitter remarks of the people assembled under the Rashomon. There is only one perception about which the woodcutter, the commoner and the priest can agree, and that is the weakness and ill fate of human beings who are basically doomed to
misery. As mentioned, that dire perception is hardly mitigated by the final scene.

*After the Rain* contemplates the same processes of adjudication, but offers an entirely different perspective. In the room of Ihei's master, there is a banner that says: 'Not truth -- but fact.' This paradoxical and enigmatic idiom is a sort of answer to the unsolved issues raised in *Rashomon*. Indeed, there is a possibility of reconciling between the existence of a certain 'fact' and the impossibility of labelling it as 'truth'. In *After the Rain* the judging is used not in order to inflict harsh sentencing, but rather in order to attain all sorts of pardoning. Lord Shigeaki, after listening to his internal voice, evoked by his wife, actually pardons Misawa Ihei. Tayo, Ihei's wife, pardons her husband, and thus gives Ihei the necessary tool in order to pardon himself. People are depicted here as worthy of redemption, and capable of achieving it by being strong and loyal to some guiding integrity that can always be found within our souls.

Here comes to mind an observation made by the over seventy year old Borges: 'The same few plots, I am sorry to say, have pursued me down through the years.' (Borges, 1972: 10) Bearing in mind the close links between *Rashomon* and *After the Rain*, perhaps Akira Kurosawa experienced a similar sentiment that urged him to re-work some of the themes present in one of the main stories he ever told -- *Rashomon* -- and re-tell them in a new way. In notes that Kurosawa left with his script he wrote: 'It should be a story that, when you have seen it, leaves you feeling cheered.' Takashi Koizume and the team that created *After the Rain* have succeeded in faithfully fulfilling this wish.

**References:**
