

Care and Recognition: The Maternal Legitimacy Paradox in Japanese Cinema *Close-Knit* (2017) and *Midnight Swan* (2020)

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Abstract: Motherhood in Japanese cinema is often constructed through normative frameworks that privilege biological ties over caregiving practices. This study aims to examine how maternal legitimacy is constructed and contested in *Close-Knit* (2017) and *Midnight Swan* (2020). The research employs the Discourse-Historical Approach (DHA) to analyze discursive strategies, particularly nomination, predication, and argumentation, in representing maternal figures. The findings reveal a contradiction in which trans maternal figures, despite performing intensive caregiving and emotional labor, are not fully recognized as legitimate mothers. In contrast, biological mothers retain their legitimacy regardless of their caregiving performance, even when they are associated with neglect or instability. This indicates that maternal legitimacy is primarily grounded in biological essentialism rather than relational caregiving practices. The study concludes that motherhood in contemporary Japanese cinema is structured through heteronormative and biopolitical frameworks that prioritize biological reproduction over caregiving. This condition is conceptualized as a maternal legitimacy paradox, highlighting the gap between performed motherhood and socially recognized motherhood.

Keywords: DHA Wodak, Japanese cinema, maternal legitimacy, motherhood, trans maternal

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1. INTRODUCTION

Motherhood in Japan has long been shaped by normative expectations that position biological mothers as the primary and legitimate caregivers within the family. These expectations are embedded in cultural and social discourses that associate motherhood with emotional stability, domestic responsibility, and self-sacrifice. In media representations, particularly in film, such ideals are often reproduced, reinforcing a narrow understanding of maternal legitimacy grounded in heteronormative and genealogical frameworks. As a result, motherhood is frequently equated with biological reproduction rather than caregiving practices or relational dynamics.

However, contemporary Japanese cinema presents more complex representations of motherhood that challenge these normative assumptions. Films such as *Close-Knit* (2017) and *Midnight Swan* (2020) depict not only heterosexual biological mothers but also trans maternal figures who actively engage in caregiving practices. These representations reveal tensions between biological definitions of motherhood and lived practices of care, particularly when non-biological figures perform roles traditionally associated with maternal identity. Despite their emotional labor and domestic contributions, trans maternal figures often remain outside the boundaries of full maternal recognition.

Existing scholarship has explored motherhood from various perspectives, including the distinction between motherhood as an institution and mothering as a practice, as articulated by Adrienne Rich [1], and the reproduction of maternal roles across generations, discussed by Nancy Chodorow [2]. Studies on gender and recognition, particularly by Judith Butler [3], have further emphasized how social intelligibility determines the

legitimacy of gendered subjects. In addition, perspectives on affect and emotional attachment, such as those developed by Sara Ahmed [4], highlight the role of emotional labor in structuring social relations. While these studies provide important insights, limited attention has been given to how maternal legitimacy is discursively constructed through the intersection of caregiving practices and biological frameworks, especially in the context of Japanese cinema.

To address this gap, this study employs the Discourse-Historical Approach (DHA) developed by Ruth Wodak to examine how motherhood is constructed and negotiated in *Close-Knit* and *Midnight Swan*. By analyzing nomination, predication, and argumentation (topoi), this study explores how maternal figures are categorized, attributed with specific qualities, and legitimized within broader socio-cultural discourses. This study aims to analyze how discursive strategies shape the recognition of maternal figures in relation to caregiving practices and biological ties. Specifically, it seeks to answer the following research question: how is maternal legitimacy constructed and contested through caregiving practices and biological frameworks in contemporary Japanese cinema?

This study proposes the concept of a maternal legitimacy paradox to capture the contradiction between caregiving practices and maternal recognition. This article argues that maternal legitimacy in Japanese cinema is not determined by caregiving practices alone, but is primarily structured through biological essentialism, producing a paradox in which affective care does not guarantee maternal recognition. The maternal legitimacy paradox refers to the contradiction between performed motherhood—expressed through caregiving practices and emotional labor—and socially recognized motherhood, which continues to privilege biological ties within heteronormative frameworks.

The findings demonstrate that trans maternal figures, despite performing intensive caregiving and emotional labor, are not fully recognized as legitimate mothers. In contrast, biological mothers retain their legitimacy regardless of caregiving performance. The novelty of this research lies in its conceptual contribution, which shifts the focus from representation and identity to the discursive mechanisms that structure maternal legitimacy.

2. METHOD

This study employs the Discourse-Historical Approach (DHA) developed by Ruth Wodak [5], [6] to analyze the trans-maternal body as a biopolitical site in two Japanese films, *Close-Knit* (2017) and *Midnight Swan* (2020). The DHA was selected to examine the dialectical relationship between discursive strategies within the filmic texts and the socio-historical contexts that shape and constrain such representations. This approach emphasizes that discourse is not an isolated entity but is inherently linked to history, power relations, and broader social structures. In this study, trans-motherhood is represented not as an autonomous maternal identity, but as a negotiation embodied within the physical self, shaped by biomedical authority and social regulation. This approach is consistent with critical discourse analysis, which emphasizes the role of language in reproducing social power relations [7].

The research corpus consists of two Japanese films: Naoko Oigami's *Close-Knit* [8] and Eiji Uchida's *Midnight Swan* [9]. These films were selected for their portrayal of transexual female protagonists who assume maternal roles and engage in caregiving. Furthermore, both films were produced within a similar timeframe (2017 and 2020) and have received positive critical acclaim at various national and international film festivals.

2.1. Data Collection Technique

The primary data analyzed in this article consist of visual scenes and dialogues relevant to caregiving practices (Sayuri, Hiromi, Nagisa, Rinko), the process of motherhood (Nagisa), and kids as agents of maternal legitimation. The units of analysis were selected purposively based on their relevance to the research question: how is maternal legitimacy constructed and contested through caregiving practices and biological frameworks in contemporary Japanese cinema?

Data were collected through the following steps:

1. Repetitive and intensive viewing to comprehend the narrative structure and situational context;
2. Transcribing dialogues related to trans-maternal embodiment and power relations;
3. Documenting visual data through screenshots of significant scenes.

Secondary data were sourced from academic literature relevant to trans mother experiences, gender, family, and film studies. This literature provides the conceptual framework and socio-historical context necessary to analyze

the construction of maternal legitimacy through caregiving practices and biological frameworks in contemporary Japanese cinema.

2.2. Data Analysis Technique

The data analysis in this study is conducted through several systematic stages:

Stage 1: Identification of Themes and Patterns of Representation

The initial stage involves identifying primary themes and recurring patterns of representation within the selected scenes.

Stage 2: Analysis of Discursive Strategies (DHA)

The selected scenes are analyzed using the discursive strategies of Wodak's DHA, focusing on three primary strategies: nomination, predication, and argumentation (topoi). Nomination strategies examine how the maternal figure is named or categorized; in the context of both films, terms such as *'okaasan'* (おかあさん) and *'mama'* (ママ) serve as markers of motherhood. Predication strategies identify the attributes or qualities attached to these figures, such as being "nurturing," "responsible," "neglectful," or "deviant." Argumentation strategies are analyzed through topoi—conclusion rules or argumentative schemes used to justify or challenge maternal legitimacy. Identified topoi include the biological topos (emphasizing birth mothers as "true" mothers), the domestic sacrifice topos (valuing motherhood through labor and self-sacrifice), and the family stability topos (emphasizing the biological family unit as essential to a child's stability). These strategies are identified through dialogue analysis, visual expressions, the arrangement of domestic space, and narrative resolution.

Stage 3: Socio-Historical Contextualization

The third stage involves socio-historical contextualization. In this stage, the discursive strategies identified in the selected scenes are interpreted in relation to broader socio-historical contexts. This includes situating the representation of motherhood within the historical construction of maternal ideology in Japan, particularly the emphasis on biological motherhood, gendered division of labor, and the normative structure of the family.

Drawing on the Discourse-Historical Approach developed by Ruth Wodak, this stage examines how discourses are embedded within and shaped by specific social, cultural, and historical conditions. The analysis connects textual and visual representations in the films to dominant discourses surrounding heteronormativity, family legitimacy, and the regulation of gendered bodies.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1. Care Without Recognition: Trans Maternal Figures

This section examines trans maternal figures who perform what may be described as *good mothering*, namely Rinko in *Close-Knit* (2017) and Nagisa in *Midnight Swan* (2020). Following S. Imrie et al. [10], the term *trans* refers to individuals whose gender identity differs from the sex assigned at birth, encompassing a wide range of gender-diverse identities. In the context of these films, however, Rinko and Nagisa are not only represented as transgender individuals but also as transsexual women who have undergone medical transition. This representation situates their bodies within a biomedical framework, where gender identity is mediated through medical and institutional validation, reflecting what Michel Foucault conceptualizes as the regulation of bodies through biopolitical mechanisms [11].

To construct these trans women as capable maternal figures, the films attribute to them qualities associated with ideal motherhood, such as affection, attentiveness, emotional care, and self-sacrifice. According to Masami Ohinata [12], such attributes reflect dominant cultural expectations of motherhood in Japan. Within Ruth Wodak's Discourse-Historical Approach, these attributes function as predication strategies, assigning positive moral qualities to maternal figures and positioning them within a recognizable framework of normative motherhood [6].



Figure 1. Rinko promises to prepare Tomo’s favorite meals during her stay (Close-Knit, 00:13:25).



Figure 2. Rinko’s handmade kyara-bento (cute bento) for Tomo’s lunch (Close-Knit, 22:08)



Figure 3. Rinko comforts Tomo after a nightmare (Close-Knit, 00:46:13).



Figure 4. Rinko teaches Tomo knitting as a form of emotional expression (Close-Knit, 00:57:41).

As illustrated in Figures 1–4, Rinko performs a range of domestic and emotional caregiving practices, including preparing meals, making *kyara-bento* (cute lunch boxes), providing emotional comfort, and teaching coping mechanisms such as knitting. These practices align with normative expectations of motherhood and reinforce her construction as a caring and emotionally stable maternal figure. From a discursive perspective, these repeated acts of caregiving can be understood through Judith Butler’s concept of performativity, where identity is constituted through repeated social practices rather than biological essence [13] [3]. These practices also reflect the affective dimension of caregiving, where emotional labor plays a crucial role in structuring maternal relationships [14]. In this sense, Rinko’s maternal identity is not inherent but produced through the continuous performance of caregiving. This suggests that caregiving practices function as a basis for maternal identity construction; however, they remain insufficient to secure full social recognition within dominant normative frameworks.

However, despite this alignment with normative maternal practices, trans maternal figures remain only partially recognized. This is evident in nomination strategies, where they are addressed by their personal names (e.g., “Rinko-san” or “Nagisa-san”) rather than maternal terms such as *okaasan* or *mama*, which are reserved for biological mothers. This linguistic distinction limits their symbolic inclusion within normative family structures. Thus, their maternal legitimacy remains conditional, shaped by broader heteronormative frameworks that privilege biological ties.



Figure 5. Nagisa expresses her initial rejection of Ichika (*Midnight Swan*, 00:11:32).



Figure 6. Nagisa and Ichika practice ballet together (*Midnight Swan*, 01:03:26).



Figure 7. Nagisa encourages Ichika to become stronger (*Midnight Swan*, 01:03:06).



Figure 8. Nagisa challenges herself to work as a prostitute to earn a lot of money for Ichika's ballet course (*Midnight Swan*, 01:07:02)

A similar pattern can be observed in the character of Nagisa, although her maternal identity is constructed as a process rather than a stable condition. As shown in Figures 5–8, Nagisa initially rejects Ichika but gradually develops a sense of responsibility and emotional attachment. Her transformation from rejection to acceptance demonstrates that motherhood is not an essential identity but a relational and evolving process. Her willingness to engage in stigmatized labor, such as sex work, to support Ichika's ballet training further emphasizes the depth of her caregiving commitment.

Nevertheless, this process of becoming a mother does not result in full recognition. While Nagisa performs maternal care in ways that align with normative expectations, her legitimacy remains fragile and temporary. This reflects a broader structural condition in which trans maternal figures are positioned as liminal subjects, whose recognition is contingent and unstable. As argued by Sara Ahmed [4], emotional attachments play a crucial role in shaping social relations; however, such affective investments do not necessarily translate into social legitimacy. This reinforces the argument that maternal legitimacy is not secured through caregiving performance but is contingent upon normative structures that privilege biological ties over relational care.

Taken together, these representations illustrate that caregiving practices alone are insufficient to secure maternal recognition. Instead, trans maternal bodies are discursively constructed as conditionally legitimate subjects, whose inclusion within the category of motherhood remains constrained by dominant socio-cultural norms.

3.2. Recognition Without Care: Biological Mothers

In contrast to trans maternal figures, biological mothers in both films—Hiromi, Saori, and Sayuri—are discursively constructed through negative maternal attributes. Through predication strategies, they are associated with instability, neglect, and emotional detachment, positioning them as “bad mothers” within the narrative.



Figure 9. Sayuri criticizes Hiromi, projecting her past experiences onto Tomo (*Close-Knit*, 00:38:51).

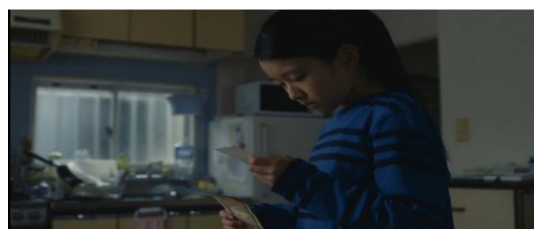


Figure 10. Hiromi leaves Tomo with a letter and some money without saying goodbye (*Close-Knit*, 05:10)



Figure 11. Hiromi highlights that she is still a woman who sometimes feels tiring in parenting Tomo (*Close-Knit*, 01:48:28)

Sayuri, for instance, is portrayed as a harsh and critical maternal figure whose behavior is shaped by psychological trauma resulting from her husband's infidelity (see Figure 9). As suggested by Jules et al. [15], such experiences may lead to post-traumatic stress or emotional instability, which in turn affects interpersonal relationships. This trauma manifests in Sayuri's strained relationship with her daughter, Hiromi, characterized by constant criticism and emotional distance. In this context, her maternal behavior reflects not only individual disposition but also the long-term impact of unresolved psychological distress. Such conditions may be understood within a broader biopolitical framework, in which bodies and family structures are regulated through social and institutional norms [11].

Hiromi, in turn, reproduces these patterns in her own relationship with her daughter, Tomo. Drawing on Nancy Chodorow's concept of the reproduction of mothering [2], maternal practices are shaped by earlier mother-daughter relationships. Hiromi's inability to form a stable, nurturing bond with Tomo can thus be understood as a continuation of intergenerational patterns of dysfunctional mothering. Her actions, such as leaving Tomo alone for extended periods (see Figure 10) and expressing ambivalence toward caregiving responsibilities (see Figure 11), reinforce her construction as a neglectful maternal figure.



Figure 12. Saori beats Ichika, her daughter (*Midnight Swan*, 05: 12)



Figure 13. Saori feels that she's not a good mother (*Midnight Swan*, 06:47)

Similarly, Saori (Figure 12) is depicted as an abusive and emotionally unstable mother who engages in both physical and verbal violence against her daughter, Ichika. Her behavior is closely linked to broader socio-

economic and psychological conditions, including financial hardship and poor mental health. As noted by Kato et al. [16], factors such as economic precarity, substance use, and psychological distress significantly affect parenting practices among single mothers in Japan. Furthermore, Raymo and Zhou [17] emphasize that financial constraints and social pressures contribute to heightened stress levels, which may negatively impact maternal behavior.

The sense of inadequacy is explicitly articulated when Saori acknowledges her failure as a mother (see Figure 13). Rather than indicating a transformation, this moment reinforces her construction as an unstable and insufficient maternal figure, further supporting the predication of biological mothers as “bad mothers” within the narrative. Despite their failure to perform normative caregiving roles, these biological mothers retain their status as legitimate maternal figures. This suggests that maternal legitimacy is not contingent upon caregiving performance but is instead grounded in biological essentialism. From a broader theoretical perspective, this condition reflects what Michel Foucault describes as a biopolitical framework, in which family structures and reproductive relations function as key mechanisms for regulating social order [11]. Within this framework, biological ties remain the primary basis for recognizing maternal authority, regardless of the quality of caregiving. This contrast highlights that maternal legitimacy operates independently of caregiving performance, revealing a structural bias toward biological essentialism.

3.3. The Maternal Legitimacy Paradox

The contrast between trans maternal figures and biological mothers reveals a fundamental contradiction in the construction of motherhood. While trans mothers perform caregiving practices that align with normative expectations, they remain only partially recognized as legitimate maternal figures. Conversely, biological mothers retain their legitimacy despite failing to perform these roles adequately.



Figure 14. Tomo explicitly acknowledges Rinko as a good mother (*Close-Knit*, 01:50:05)



Figure 15. Tomo questions her biological mother’s failure to fulfill maternal responsibilities (*Close-Knit*, 01:50:10)



Figure 16. Tomo chooses to stay with Hiro (01:51:16) (*Close-Knit*,



Figure 17. Saori asks Ichika to go back home (*Midnight Swan*, 01: 20: 05)

This contradiction is further reinforced through the perspectives of the children. As shown in the above Figures (Figures 14 and 15), Tomo explicitly acknowledges Rinko as a good mother and questions her biological mother’s failure to fulfill maternal responsibilities. In this sense, Tomo acts as an agent of recognition,

temporarily shifting maternal legitimacy from biological to caregiving-based criteria. Similarly, although Ichika does not verbalize her recognition of Nagisa explicitly, her emotional attachment to Nagisa suggests an affective acknowledgment of her as a maternal figure.

However, despite these affective recognitions, both narratives ultimately reaffirm the primacy of biological ties. As shown in Figures 16 and 17, the children ultimately return to their biological mothers. From a DHA perspective, this reflects a tension between the topos of caregiving and the topos of biology, in which the latter ultimately prevails in determining maternal legitimacy.

This study conceptualizes this contradiction as a maternal legitimacy paradox, demonstrating that motherhood is governed not by relational practices alone, but by normative regimes that regulate which forms of care are socially intelligible and legitimate.

In this sense, maternal legitimacy is not determined solely by practice but is structured through normative and biopolitical frameworks that privilege biological reproduction over relational care.

This paradox may also be understood through what Lauren Berlant describes as “cruel optimism,” in which individuals remain attached to normative structures that are difficult to sustain [18]. The children’s return to their biological mothers reflects an attachment to the ideal of the biological family, even when such structures fail to provide emotional stability.

Ultimately, these findings demonstrate that maternal legitimacy is not a neutral or natural category but a socially and discursively constructed one. The films reveal how dominant frameworks of gender, family, and reproduction continue to define the boundaries of motherhood, limiting the recognition of alternative maternal forms despite their alignment with caregiving practices.

4. CONCLUSION

This study has demonstrated that maternal legitimacy in contemporary Japanese cinema is constructed through competing discourses of caregiving and biological essentialism. While trans maternal figures perform caregiving practices that align with normative expectations of motherhood, their recognition remains limited due to the absence of biological ties. In contrast, biological mothers retain legitimacy despite failing to perform caregiving roles adequately.

These findings reveal a maternal legitimacy paradox, in which caregiving does not guarantee recognition, while biological ties continue to determine maternal authority. This suggests that motherhood is not solely defined by practice but is regulated through broader social and discursive frameworks.

This study contributes to gender and media studies by rethinking maternal legitimacy beyond biological essentialism and by demonstrating how discursive mechanisms regulate the recognition of motherhood. By foregrounding the gap between caregiving practices and social legitimacy, this research highlights the limitations of normative family frameworks in accommodating alternative maternal forms, particularly in the context of contemporary Japanese cinema.

FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research may explore how maternal legitimacy is constructed across different cultural contexts and media forms, including television and digital platforms. Further studies could also examine the intersection between legal frameworks and cultural representations of motherhood, particularly in relation to gender diversity. Additionally, audience reception studies may provide insight into how viewers interpret and negotiate alternative forms of motherhood beyond heteronormative structures.

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