

Shifting Shapes, Shifting Selves: The Cultural Afterlife of the Shapeshifter

Ms. Aishna Rahi

Student, Arts – English, Amity University, Noida

Abstract

Since time immemorial, shapeshifting has been used as a potent metaphor for hybridity, fluid identity and transformation. The shapeshifter as a supernatural creature, grounded in folklore and mythology, is a common presence in Japanese anime and manga. It serves as a site for negotiating issues of gender, sexuality, and self-hood within contemporary readership globally. This dissertation examines how the characters in *Kamisama Hajimemashita* and *Inuyasha* battle their own conscious, otherization, and traditional stereotypes, against Human-Yokai relations. Shapeshifting here transcends the physical metamorphosis and dives beyond what is external; it is not a mere visual spectacle in these manga and anime, rather it acts as a narrative device which drives personal and emotional evolution. This study also investigates how digital fandoms actively reframe and expand shapeshifting narratives through fan-fiction, fan-arts, and fan-theories. By integrating folklore studies, this dissertation traces the continuities between traditional myths and their contemporary revisions, illustrating how shapeshifting mirrors real-life struggle, while simultaneously providing the much desired sense of escapism from the same. Through close readings of the two shoujo texts, this research explores transformation, both physical and symbolic, as a mode of resistance, fantasy, and self-reinvention within anime and manga; this has been possible through the characters of Tomoe (*Kamisama Hajimemashita*) and Inuyasha (*Inuyasha*).

Home is a deeply personal sanctuary. Offering safety and comfort, it is an imagined concept and man-made state which acts as a microcosm of cherished relationships and memories; building an environment where individuals can truly be themselves. However, not all are fortunate enough to have such a space, and for some, the concept of home is often redefined. Julietta Suzuki's *Kamisama Hajimemashita* and Rumiko Takahashi's *Inuyasha* explore the journey of finding home within oneself, guided by the support of loved ones. The Japanese kitsune, fox-spirit, both worshipped and feared, is seen as a trickster and guardian. Tomoe, formerly a wild fox, loathes humanity but after a fateful meeting with Nanami, transforms into a devoted protector, mirroring the shapeshifter's duality in folklore, bouncing between malice and benevolence based on their personal experiences. Similarly, Inuyasha's status as a hanyou leaves him torn between human and demon worlds. His struggle for acceptance reflects a sort of contract written in the depth of his heart, expanding larger themes of identity and belonging. His bond with Kagome forces him to confront whether identity is inherited or a self-effort. Both the shapeshifters are left questioning whether their life is a bad dream or a pre-destined event waiting to take place, they are however, certain that they cannot escape themselves. These two works are at a common ground with bildungsroman ideas - the two characters successfully achieve what until now they had only supposed to be their wishful thinking - peace with their identities.

Shapeshifting narratives have been a part of our lives since man began to write, from Bram Stoker's *Dracula* to the Rakshasas of Hindu mythology. Skinwalkers, shapeshifting warlocks from Navajo folklore are the most popular of their kind on social media platforms such as Instagram. There have been rumours of their spotting in areas like New Mexico and Arizona; this is perhaps the closest we may be able to get the shapeshifters. Across a multiplicity of cultures, these stories embody the binary oppositions and the fluidity of being, existing in folklore, mythological scriptures, magical realism, manga, and anime.

The fan cultures of late 20th century and early 21st century plays a crucial role in giving life to these narratives. Henry Jenkins is an American Media Scholar and has authored over twenty books about the various elements of media and popular culture. He conceptualised participatory culture, discussing how audiences dig deep and express stories beyond what the author intended. With the advent of technology, not only could manga be serialized faster, anime was created and now could be watched by those who weren't particularly a fan of reading. By the 2010s, anime was also translated with English and other foreign language subtitles, bringing joy to a wider range of audiences around the globe. *Inuyasha* and *Kamisama Hajimemashita* have inspired fan fiction, artwork, and other discourses, often altering canonical narratives. Platforms like Tumblr, Wattpad and Archive of Our Own (AO3) give space to the fans for their imaginations of such works of art, further blurring the line between official and transformative storytelling. The shapeshifters' inherent fluidity is an ongoing current with the very nature of fan reinterpretation - boundless, evolving, and resistant to fixed structures.

In art, transmutation advances beyond what the fantastical allows the individual identity to encompass. During the age of surrealism, there was Salvador Dali, whose *The Metamorphosis of Narcissus* embodied transformation both as a loss and a reinvention of identity. It graphically communicated the fragile nature of selfhood. Jose Esteban Munoz, American-Cuban academic, also conveys in *Disidentifications* that marginalised categories are dynamic and constantly defy fixed classifications. The ordeal of pendulating between worlds, whether confined by gender, culture, or social ties, is symbolised by Tomoe and Inuyasha's tensions. "*I don't want to become a full demon. If I did that, I'd be just like the ones who made my childhood miserable,*" Inuyasha cries, reinforcing the central tension between power and self-acceptance. While the nature of fiction is to help one escape reality, it is the need of the hour for the people to still stay connected with the life that they are living now. These two works do not dispel our worries, they teach us how to overcome them. The reader comes face to face with their own troubles but finds a way out with love and support of loved ones, just as Tomoe and Inuyasha do.

In spite of emotional and action sequences, readers claim *Inuyasha* and *Kamisama Hajimemashita* to be their "comfort series". The characters are a little scared, and a little unsure, but they're willing to open the door to possibilities that are brought in once the real adventure of their lives begins. Walt Whitman in *Song of Myself* stretches out a hand forward for embracing multiplicity and acceptance of contradictions, "I am large, I contain multitudes." This resonates with the transformative journeys of Tomoe and Inuyasha who exist between two realities, never fully becoming one with either. Much like Whitman's poetic voice defying a singular-concrete identity, Inuyasha is torn apart between his human and demon race in a battle for self-acceptance. Through Kagome's steady effort and belief in his inherent kindness, he learns to navigate within his binary instead of suppressing one. And while Tomoe is usually comfortable with his status as a fox-spirit, there are instances of Nanami's vulnerability that make him question the fragility of human life. He rejects his humanness yet, he cannot quite escape it. By the end, he seems to appreciate the beauty that comes with mortality with Nanami's presence which fosters this change. Whitman opined that identity is fluid and ever-evolving. Inuyasha and Tomoe, through their journeys of self-discovery,

extend the idea that identities and perceptions are neither predetermined nor preset. Furthermore, these character profiles also parallels Samuel Taylor Coleridge's fascination with the supernatural and liminality. Much like Inuyasha's inner dilemma to reconcile his demon and human sides, *Frankenstein* by Mary Shelly raised questions about what exactly can be defined as humanity. Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines* too explores these boundaries between human and non-human both geographical and personal, as imagined illusions. Even Samuel Beckett's themes of existentialism are found echoing loudly here, as Inuyasha and Tomoe wrestle with grappling uncertainty, searching for meaning in their transformations. They're waiting for a light that is to never come unless they learn to accept themselves. Mutability also gives a glimpse into gender reconstruction, for fluid identity questions the norms set by society. *Female Masculinity* by Jack Halberstam, American author and academic, ventured to explore gender as a performed act than fixed. Tomoe's choice to become a human is not just an act of love, rather is a rejection of rigid masculinity with tenderness and vulnerability, tearing down hyper-masculine tropes of romance. Inuyasha and Tomoe confidently carry the traits which are typically "female-coded" - they groom long, beautiful hair, are good cooks, and exhibit caregiving roles. Tomoe frequently tends to Nanami, not just as her familiar but also because he wants to take care of her. Inuyasha too, prepares food for his companions and braids Kagome's hair. The authors of the two works have actively interacted with gender external to traditional anime stereotypes. These transformations thus, whether interpersonal, emotional, physical, all challenge the roles assigned to genders, showing how identity is variable and not fixed. *Inuyasha* and *Kamisama Kiss* have set themselves apart, challenging the conventional binary gender thought, by giving young girls strong female leads, and male protagonists who do not discriminate between the various roles.

Through posthumanist and reader driven interpretations, shapeshifting can also be seen operating outside the traditional folktales. According to Morphology of the Folk Tale, Propp's functions of the folktale, Tomoe and Inuyasha's adventurous supernatural journeys are framed in a manner of self-discovery tribulations in which they must establish their value not just in combat but also in defining their identities. Their internal conflicts align with Levi-Strauss' binary oppositions while fighting against them, human/non-human and past/future. These struggles, reflecting posthumanist ideas, view identity as not something concrete but as an evolving, and fluid process. Tomoe's resistance to change is captured in his words, "*I don't want to become human. I am a yokai, and that is all I have ever known.*" Yet, reshaped by his love for Nanami and rewarding experiences, he gradually learns to love and value human emotions; and Inuyasha finds peace with his dual being.

These journeys transcend narrative arcs and, as stated in the reader-response theory, resonate directly with the audience. Their domestic hardships are emphasised in the form of the characters' struggles, reinforcing the idea that these shapeshifting stories are more than just fiction, they hold the true essence of one's identity, a metaphor for the human condition - belonging and persistent affair of becoming. These two pieces of art have left readers wanting and begging for more, yet leaving them with a sense of fulfillment. Tomoe and Inuyasha embody a part of them that had for long been abandoned and isolated, their real selves which were afraid to ask for help, fearing for their loneliness to be met with rejection and disdain.