

Gendered Paradoxes in Shōnen Anime: A Visual Narrative Study of Character Design and Fandom Reception of Sakura Haruno and Nami

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of the study was to investigate the representation of female characters in popular shōnen anime across different generations by examining Sakura Haruno (Naruto) and Nami (One Piece). Both characters occupy central narrative positions yet elicit paradoxical responses within international fandoms. The materials analyzed comprised the visual and narrative texts of the selected anime series, as well as audience reception data drawn from digital fan communities. A qualitative descriptive methodology was employed, utilizing a visual narrative approach informed by Greimas's narrative theory, Laura Mulvey's feminist theory of representation, postfeminist perspectives, and Edwards's narrative framework. Data were collected through close visual analysis of character design, narrative functions, expressive behaviors, and visual framing, alongside interpretative analysis of fandom discourse across online platforms. The results demonstrate that the representations of Sakura Haruno and Nami are characterized by narrative dissonance, particularly stemming from the tension between their heroic contributions and their recurrent deployment as comedic figures or objects of visual emphasis. This dissonance contributes to fragmented and polarized audience interpretations at the global level. The study concludes that female character representation in shōnen anime remains significantly shaped by gendered narrative structures and patriarchal visual conventions, which continue to influence patterns of reception and debate within international fandom cultures.

Keywords: Representation, gender, anime, narrative, fandom

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INTRODUCTION

Anime constitutes a prominent form of visual entertainment with extensive global reach. Its appeal extends beyond engaging storylines to encompass the strength of visual narration, which plays a crucial role in shaping atmosphere, reinforcing character construction, and eliciting emotional responses from audiences. Through the strategic integration of visual elements such as color, symbolism, movement, and facial expression, anime functions as a medium capable of communicating social and cultural meanings in a distinctive aesthetic form. This visual language not only differentiates anime from other audiovisual media but also contributes to its capacity to convey layered narratives with significant emotional depth.

The representation of female characters constitutes a critical dimension in anime studies. Women are portrayed through a wide spectrum of characterizations, ranging from gentle and emotionally expressive figures to independent and resilient personas, thereby contributing to narrative complexity. Nevertheless, the expansion of the anime industry alongside its growing global audience has generated sustained critical discourse regarding the ways in which female characters are constructed. Particular attention has been directed toward issues of bodily visualization, narrative positioning, and the patterns of reception that emerge within international fandom communities.

Female characters in anime frequently encounter a paradox in audience reception, wherein figures that do not conform to dominant aesthetic ideals tend to attract critical or unfavorable responses, while those perceived as visually appealing are more readily celebrated. This dynamic is evident in long-standing and widely popular series such as *Naruto* and *One Piece*, particularly through the contrasting reception of Sakura Haruno and Nami, whose portrayals reveal divergent patterns of evaluation within international fandom communities.

Employing a visual narrative approach, the analysis examines how visual composition, character expression, and narrative structure contribute to the construction of both characters' representations and their relationship to feminist perspectives. A review of previous studies is incorporated to reinforce the theoretical framework underpinning this research.

Ardianto Prayogo's study (2015), entitled *Gambaran Sensualitas Tubuh Perempuan dalam Komik One Piece* [The Representation of Female Bodily Sensuality in the One Piece Comic] examines the depiction of the female body as a form of visual attraction and commodification. However, the analysis is primarily confined to visual aspects and does not extend to an exploration of audience perspectives or reception.

Rachmawardani Putri Witjaksono's research (2018), titled "Adaptasi Pilot Perempuan dalam Drama Miss Pilot" [The Adaptation of Female Pilots in the Drama Miss Pilot] explores the representation of women within a masculinized professional environment through a postfeminist lens. The study highlights women's struggles against sexism and their pursuit of equality, yet it does not address how such representations shape or influence audience perceptions.

Sangra Juliano's work (2015), "'Komunikasi dan Gender'" [Communication and Gender] investigates differences in male and female communication styles as shaped by gender constructions. However, the study remains primarily situated within a linguistic framework and does not engage with visual media representation, thereby leaving room for further research on the construction of gender within popular culture.

The three preceding studies bear conceptual relevance to the present research entitled "Gendered Paradoxes in Shōnen Anime: A Visual Narrative Study of Character Design and Fandom Reception of Sakura Haruno and Nami," as they collectively examine the ways in which female representation is constructed and conveyed through media, albeit within distinct analytical frameworks and contextual settings. This research seeks to address the conceptual limitations of prior scholarship by integrating a visual narrative approach with an analysis of international fandom reception. Through this combined methodological perspective, the study aims to explicate the paradoxical relationship between representational forms and audience reception of female characters in popular Japanese anime.

METHOD

This research draws on Greimas's narrative theory (1983), as articulated by Trischa Goodnow, which emphasizes the interpretation of character actions, behaviors, and the social responses they generate. To strengthen the analytical framework, a postfeminist perspective based on Rosalind

Gill's *Gender and the Media* (2007) is employed to examine the dynamics of female representation within contemporary popular culture, alongside Laura Mulvey's (1975) feminist theory of representation, particularly her concept of the male gaze in visual construction. In addition, Edwards's (1997) theory of visual action is applied to highlight the role of visualized actions as central drivers of narrative progression. Data were collected through in-depth observation of visual and narrative elements in *Naruto* and *One Piece*, including analyses of scenes, dialogue, facial expressions, bodily gestures, costume design, and intercharacter interactions. Supplementary data were drawn from international fandom reception across digital platforms, such as online forums, social media, and fan-produced works. Data analysis was conducted through feminist, postfeminist, and visual narrative approaches, employing stages of data reduction, categorization, and interpretative analysis. The validity of the findings was ensured through source triangulation by cross-referencing anime texts, audience reception, and relevant scholarly literature.

FINDING AND DISCUSSION

A.J. Greimas (1983) posits that the significance of characters lies not in their individual traits, but in the ways their relationships generate and sustain narrative action. Since storytelling is fundamentally driven by action, characters function as essential agents through which narrative movement and relational dynamics are produced. Consequently, within the narrative framework, character significance is articulated not merely through inherent traits, but through actions performed in the storyline. Accordingly, both positive and negative fandom responses emerge from the ways characters behave within the narrative and how their visual representations communicate these roles to audiences.

Image 1. Ranked through international fan voting



Despite securing third place rankings in global popularity polls, with Nami placing third in the *One Piece* Worldwide Character Poll (2021) and Sakura achieving the same position in *Naruto* Top 99 (2023), both characters continue to elicit highly polarized responses among audiences. While these rankings indicate a substantial level of popularity, they also reveal ongoing tensions in fan discourse, as admiration for their narrative significance frequently coexists with criticism related to their characterization and visual representation.

While both characters are appreciated by certain segments of the fan community, they are simultaneously subjected to criticism by others. Such negative reactions do not arise arbitrarily but are closely tied to the interpretation of their actions within the narrative framework. Specific behaviors and decisions portrayed in the storyline often invite divergent readings, thereby producing a paradoxical dynamic of admiration and rejection within fandom communities.

The Paradox of Sakura Haruno Character in Relation to Actions and Agency

In episode 32 of *Naruto*, entitled “Sakura Blossoms,” a particular scene has frequently become a focal point of debate regarding Sakura Haruno’s characterization. The moment in which she chooses to cut her own hair has generated diverse responses among fans. While some viewers argue that Sakura could have pursued alternative forms of attack, such as relying on physical strength, the narrative context indicates that such options would have been ineffective against the opponent she confronted. Under conditions of extreme constraint and limited mobility, the act of cutting her hair emerges as the most viable strategy for freeing herself from an immediate and dangerous predicament.

Image 2. Memes depicting Sakura Haruno cutting her hair



Beyond its tactical significance, this scene carries a symbolic dimension that reflects Sakura’s character development. Since childhood, rumors regarding Sasuke’s preference for long-haired women had influenced Sakura’s decision to maintain her hair length. Consequently, the act of cutting her hair functions not only as a moment of self-preservation but also as a visual metaphor for relinquishing her dependence on an imagined ideal of femininity constructed to gain Sasuke’s attention.

Image 3. Sakura Haruno’s decision to cut her hair



In this scene, dialogue conveys that the kunai employed is no longer effective in inflicting damage on Sakura’s opponent, underscoring her physically and tactically constrained position. Rather than displaying panic, Sakura responds with a subtle smile that signals the emergence of strategic awareness and an alternative course of action. This expression operates as a visual cue indicating that she has formulated a plan beyond the use of conventional weaponry. The moment

reaches its climax when Sakura unexpectedly cuts her hair, an action that astonishes the surrounding characters. Their reaction of surprise emphasizes that Sakura's decision departs from narrative expectations, while simultaneously affirming the act as a deliberate response that integrates survival strategy with a symbolic assertion of self-control.

Image 4. Sakura Haruno's decision to cut her hair



McRobbie (2004a: 118) contends that women are continually subjected to social evaluation that targets everyday aspects such as vocal expression, bodily movement, physical appearance, clothing choices, and personal hygiene. These assessments operate as mechanisms of surveillance and discipline that regulate femininity by requiring women to conform to socially sanctioned norms of aesthetics and behavior. Such practices are embedded within ordinary discourse and thus appear naturalized, while in effect sustaining patriarchal power relations within popular culture and media.

Sakura's act of cutting her hair can be interpreted in relation to McRobbie's (2004a) discussion of the disciplining of femininity, in which women are subjected to continuous social surveillance over their bodies and appearance. This action demonstrates Sakura's capacity to make an extreme decision as an expression of individual agency aimed at survival. However, such bravery remains situated within the postfeminist framework critiqued by McRobbie, as the responsibility to be resilient and adaptive is placed entirely on the female subject without corresponding structural shifts in narrative power relations. Consequently, Sakura is required to relinquish a symbol of femininity at a personal level, while the system of combat and physical dominance within the narrative continues to be centered on male characters.

In Chapter 2, entitled *Secular Defilement, of Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo*, Mary Douglas conceptualizes defilement as a condition that emerges during liminal moments, when individuals undergo transitions in status, identity, or social roles. Such transitional states are frequently perceived as unstable and disruptive to established symbolic orders, thereby generating notions of disorder within the social structure.

The Paradox of Nami's Character in Relation to Her Actions and Agency

The confrontation between Nami and Miss Doublefinger in *One Piece* (episodes 117–118) presents a striking paradox in the construction of action and the representation of women within shōnen narratives. On one hand, the scene portrays Nami as an active agent who persists in battle despite sustaining injuries, relies on strategic intelligence, and deploys technical skill through the use of the Clima-Tact—an element that reinforces her role as the crew's navigator and tactical innovator. On the other hand, the visual framing of her body, particularly through torn clothing that accentuates sensual elements, redirects part of the audience's attention toward sexualized imagery rather than toward the competence and agency she demonstrably exercises.

Figure 5. Nami's battle against Miss Doublefinger.



Within the framework of representational feminism, Laura Mulvey's essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" (1975) provides a relevant theoretical foundation for interpreting the paradox of Nami's representation in her battle against Miss Doublefinger. Mulvey argues that visual media, including popular cinema, frequently construct women as objects of the gaze through the mechanism of the male gaze. In this process, female figures are arranged to satisfy male visual pleasure, which can result in their narrative contributions being marginalized by an excessive emphasis on bodily display.

When applied to Nami's fight scene, the concept of the male gaze becomes evident in the way the animation emphasizes torn clothing and bodily exposure during the battle. Although, at the narrative level, Nami demonstrates tactical competence by utilizing the Clima-Tact, analyzing her opponent's attack patterns, and displaying physical resilience, the visual presentation of her body functions as a distraction that diverts part of the audience's attention away from these strategic capabilities. In other words, Nami's heroic actions as a narrative subject risk being diminished by visual framing that positions her as a sexualized object.

An interesting phenomenon can be observed across various social media platforms, where fans frequently draw comparisons between Nami and Sakura Haruno. Such comparisons commonly emerge in comment sections and discussion forums when addressing the position of female characters in shōnen anime. The two characters are often juxtaposed within similar discursive frameworks, ranging from perceptions of weakness and evaluations of their contributions to the narrative, to the ways in which they are visually represented. As a result, patterns of fandom reception toward these characters reveal notable similarities, despite their existence within distinct narratives and fictional worlds.

Visual Narrative Construction of Sakura Haruno and Nami

One notable similarity in the visual narratives of Sakura Haruno and Nami lies in the use of slapstick comedy as a component of their character construction. Both female characters are frequently portrayed expressing emotions through exaggerated physical actions, such as striking others or displaying aggressive reactions within comedic contexts. This mode of representation functions not only as a source of humor but also as a means of shaping an image of female characters as temperamental and emotionally driven within the narrative structure. The repeated deployment of slapstick comedy operates as a visual–narrative strategy that contributes to the formation of audience perceptions regarding the roles and characterizations of Sakura Haruno and Nami across the story.

From Edwards's (1997) perspective, visual narratives are constructed through a sequence of images organized into a beginning, middle, and end, with visual action functioning as the primary driver of the story. This framework is highly relevant to both characters, whose narratives unfold

through successive moments of conflict, crisis, and resolution. Each character is positioned to perform a specific role within these dynamics, such that their actions, whether serious or comedic, shape audience perceptions of their place within the narrative structure. When a character occupies a particular point of conflict, audience responses to their actions can become especially intense, particularly if those actions are perceived as deviating from established genre conventions or expected narrative roles.

Image 6. Sakura and Nami are depicted through slapstick comedy.



In the cases of Sakura Haruno and Nami, a notable similarity lies in their frequent portrayal as characters associated with slapstick comedy or comic relief. According to Edwards's framework, such comedic moments tend to appear outside the primary phases of narrative crisis, thereby creating a tension between the characters' comedic image and their heroic functions within the broader conflict structure.

The scene in which Sakura cuts her hair in episode 32 constitutes a moment of personal conflict that signifies the beginning of her transformation. However, when examined through Edwards's framework, actions occurring at the crisis phase are ideally expected to demonstrate an increased contribution to conflict resolution. For some viewers, Sakura's action is perceived as lacking sufficient impact within the context of the battle, and therefore is not regarded as a strong or effective form of resolution.

Some fans interpret the scene as excessively dramatic because expectations for a display of Sakura's physical strength are not fulfilled. This perception has led the moment to be frequently transformed into meme material, as it is viewed as disproportionate to the level of narrative threat at that point in the story. Consequently, negative responses toward Sakura stem not only from her actions themselves, but also from the mismatch between the action performed at a moment of crisis and audience expectations regarding the heroic role of female characters within the action genre.

Prior to her confrontation with Miss Doublefinger, Nami was frequently labeled by some viewers as a liability, as she was often positioned as a source of humor or comedic tension. Her absence from direct physical combat contributed to the perception that her role was less significant within large-scale conflicts. From Edwards's perspective, characters who are repeatedly assigned comedic functions are often not readily accepted by audiences as crucial agents during moments of narrative crisis.

In Nami's case, her primary functions as a navigator and strategist play a structural role within the narrative but tend to receive less emphasis at moments of physical conflict. This misalignment generates misleading audience expectations, as viewers often evaluate contribution in terms of combat ability rather than essential technical roles. Consequently, when Nami ultimately engages in a serious battle in episodes 117–118, audience responses become divided between admiration and attempts to preserve previously established stereotypes.

Within Edwards's framework, audience engagement with a character is shaped by the extent to which that character is connected to the central conflict of the narrative. In many shōnen genre narratives, female characters who are frequently positioned as comedic elements tend to experience

a reduction in narrative legitimacy. As a result, their contributions to the primary conflict are often perceived as less significant, rendering even their crucial actions less convincing to the audience.

This condition creates space for the formation of negative stereotypes, such as the perception of female characters as burdensome, weak, or lacking strategic significance. Both Sakura Haruno and Nami exhibit forms of narrative dissonance, in which the comedic functions attached to their characters come into tension with heroic moments that are intended to reinforce their positions within the storyline. This tension has implications for a divided fandom reception, as reflected in audience responses that not only critique their narrative roles but also frequently shift attention toward the characters' physical appearance and bodies.

CONCLUSIONS

Based on the visual narrative analysis of Sakura Haruno in *Naruto* and Nami in *One Piece*, this study concludes that the representation of female characters in shōnen anime remains situated within a paradox of global reception. Although both characters occupy strategic roles and display significant heroic moments, the persistent attachment of comedic functions such as slapstick comedy to their characterization continues to shape audience perceptions of their narrative legitimacy and credibility. Visual presentation, emotional expression, and narrative structure collectively produce an ambivalent character image, positioned between representations of strength and the reproduction of stereotypes of weakness, ultimately resulting in polarized fandom responses. Viewed through feminist and postfeminist perspectives, this research demonstrates that the construction of female characters in popular anime across generations is still influenced by cultural contexts, aesthetic standards, and gendered expectations within global popular culture, positioning Sakura Haruno and Nami as representations of both progress and limitation in gender representation within shōnen narratives.

Future research is encouraged to broaden the scope of analysis by incorporating a wider range of female characters across different anime genres and historical periods in order to develop a more comprehensive understanding of gender representation in Japanese anime. The adoption of interdisciplinary approaches that integrate media studies, cultural studies, and audience psychology is also considered essential for deepening analyses of fandom reception patterns. Furthermore, the results of this research are expected to serve as a point of reference for anime creators and the industry in constructing female characters who function not merely as comedic or aesthetic elements, but who possess consistent roles and equivalent narrative strength. For audiences and fan communities, this study aims to foster a more reflective and critical engagement with the representation of female characters, while also helping to reduce the reproduction of gender biased stereotypes within popular culture discourse..

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