

Isekai, Fantasy and the Performed Self: Exploring Gender in Seijo no Maryoku wa Bannō Desu and Arifureta Shokugyō de Sekai Saikyō

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Abstract:

Isekai (異世界) narratives have become increasingly popular in contemporary Japanese media. *Isekai* narratives typically follow a protagonist entering another world, and often involve the accomplishment and success of these characters that reflect and respond to personal, cultural and social concerns of both the authors and audiences. This article addresses the socio-cultural and religious concerns frameworks of *isekai* narratives, and how these factors affect the exploration and presentation of gender and romance in these narratives. Moreover, it seeks to examine the relationship between the real and the fantastical representations of gender and gender roles within the narratives of two case studies, *Seijo no Maryoku wa Bannō Desu* and *Arifureta Shokugyō de Sekai Saikyō*. While *isekai* narratives are typically more fantastical in nature, reflecting the protagonist's desire to reject their previous lives, such as their bodies, even pushing the constraints of their new reality, these narratives of these case studies reflect and reinforce pre-existing gender stereotypes and roles in both the protagonist's bodies and their interpersonal relationships.

Keywords: Anime, *isekai*, gender, masculinity, femininity, fantasy.

Introduction

In the last decade, there has been a marked increase in the popularity and commercial success of otherworld, or *isekai* (異世界) narratives featuring prominently in Japanese media, such as light novels, manga, games and anime. The term *isekai* is literally translated to “otherworld” or “another world”, and these narratives typically follow the transportation of a person or people into alternate worlds. While the concept of otherworlds, and even more specifically, *isekai* narratives have existed pre-2013, the contemporary conception of ‘*isekai*’ as a defined narrative marked by recurrent literary tropes and motifs has only occurred post-2013. As such, the *isekai* narrative¹ is defined by Paul Price as a type of speculative fiction which involves a ‘portal-quest’ fantasy which allows a protagonist to cross over into another world, or an immersive and liminal story which features aspects of a gamic world, or role-playing games (RPG).² Much like most Japanese media, there is a prominent element of borrowed

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¹While there are contentious discussions around the broader definition of whether or not *isekai* narratives also constitute as a genre, a setting or both, I have chosen to use the term genre and narrative here interchangeably to refer to the specific or commonplace features of *isekai* stories.

² Paul Price, ‘A Survey of the Story Elements of Isekai Manga’, *Journal of Anime and Manga Studies*, vol. 2 (2021), p. 57-67.

intertextuality (also known as media mix) that links the many forms of *isekai* narratives across multimodal media, from light novels, manga, games and anime. Similarly to the relationship between books, television shows and movies, *isekai* narratives often start as light novels, perhaps adapted into manga, and if more commercially successful, is made into an anime.³ As the statistics show, while only 44 *isekai* light novels were adapted into anime and manga between 2012 and 2020,⁴ a record number of 385 *isekai* manga series were published between 2017 to 2019, a frequency that means roughly one new series releasing every three days.⁵ As a result, the increase in both the amount of *isekai* narratives circulating, and the subsequent commercial success of these narratives demonstrates the popularity and appeal of these stories.

As Susan Napier⁶ states, fantasy is often defined as a literature of subversion, one which is crafted as a response, a coping mechanism in response to the fear and anxiety that is incited by rapid social change. As such, the deeply fantastical nature of *isekai* narratives can similarly be seen as a response to contemporary social circumstances, that simultaneously is able to inform or discuss ideas about society and the self, and one's role in it.⁷ Hack argues that *isekai* narratives at its core, are often used as creative practice which allows one to manifest physical, emotional and social desires, as *isekai* narratives typically depict protagonists who are often resentful or experiencing negative circumstances in their lives, before being transported to a new world where they can 'start over'.⁸ Typically, the modern *isekai*, as defined by Shungiku Okapi is defined as an average Japanese person who is transported to another world, and are able to achieve any success they desire, with a fulfilling life.⁹ Thus, the standard *isekai* narrative formula facilitates stories where their protagonists discover meaningful purpose in their lives through these achievements, and often addresses personal issues such as gender and sexuality.¹⁰ While these *isekai* stories can be seen as escapist media (*genjitsu tohi*, or fleeing from reality), a 'coming-of-age' tale¹¹ or stories that address concerns and anxieties in neoliberal societies,¹² it is paramount that *isekai* narratives at core should be seen as literature which is informed by and responding to the social, personal and cultural anxieties and problems faced by both Japanese authors and broader audiences.¹³ Then, in these liminal spaces, it allows authors to efficiently make certain problems tangible, and in response, materialise a fulfilling resolution that would otherwise be impossible. Moreover, as stereotypical *isekai* narratives often lean

³ João V. Tomotani, 'My Light Novel's Title Can't be This Short! The Evolution of Light Novel Titles in Another World!!!', *Journal of Geek Studies*, vol. 7, no. 2 (2020), p. 191-121.

⁴ Fatuma Muhamed, *Rewriting Your Own Narrative: Isekai as a Contemporary Coming of Age Tale* (Master's Thesis: University of Washington, 2020), p. 5.

⁵ Price, 'A Survey of the Story Elements of Isekai Manga', p. 58.

⁶ Susan J. Napier, *The Fantastic in Modern Japanese Literature: The Subversion of Modernity* (London: Routledge, 1996), pp. 8-9.

⁷ Jessy Escande, 'The Social Significance of Isekai: A New Narrative Type in the Age of Fiction?', in *Exploring Isekai: Mapping Worlds through Anime, Manga, and Light Novels*, eds William B. Ashbaugh and Shintaro Mizushima (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2026), pp. 160-168.

⁸ Brett Hack, 'Working Worlds in Neoliberal Japan: Precarity, Imagination, and the "Other-World" Trope', *Positions: East Asia Cultures Critique*, vol. 31, no. 1 (2023), p. 172.

⁹ Muhamed, *Rewriting Your Own Narrative*, p. 5.

¹⁰ John R. Ranyard, 'Implications of the Worldwide Appeal of Japanese Anime: Softening the Ground for a Relationship with the Other', *Psychological Perspectives*, vol. 64, no. 3 (2021), p. 383.

¹¹ Muhamed, *Rewriting Your Own Narrative*, pp. 8-19

¹² Hack, 'Working Worlds in Neoliberal Japan', pp. 198-199.

¹³ Escande, 'The Social Significance of Isekai', pp. 155-156; Curtis Lu, *The Darker Sides of the Isekai Genre: An Examination of the Power of Anime and Manga* (Master's Thesis: University of San Francisco, 2020), pp. 1-7.

heavily into utopian-like happiness in idealized worlds,¹⁴ this core of fantasy often also allows for the self-insertion of the audience into the protagonists, or main character (MC) roles, presenting these characters with a chance at salvation, meaningful fulfilment, and life goals are achievable for its audience through the MC as proxy vehicle.

Thus, while the widespread appeal of *isekai* narratives can be attributed to the way that these stories often respond to individual and societal concerns, these stories are unique in how they often utilise supernatural, sacred or religious elements in the narratives.¹⁵ In these tales, there are key aspects of the narrative which directly respond to and answer questions about the perceived purpose of life and living, such as providing a second chance at life in more favourable settings, or achieving things not possible in previous lives, through a sense of “limitless potential.”¹⁶ Thus, these narratives can be seen as a type of contemporary myth, defined by Yoshiko Okuyama¹⁷ as stories with cultural-specific allegories and cultural codes, but also similarly reflective of Tani Levy’s definition of myths as modern fairytales which illustrate social problems and their subsequent catharsis within such texts.¹⁸ Using the liminal space of the Otherworld, *isekai* narratives are depicted as experiences that reside outside of the normal, the real, the everyday, whether it be spatial, temporal or cultural.¹⁹ Moreover, the creation of the *isekai* similarly draws from an abundance of literary motifs from Japanese popular culture, especially regarding the format and progression of games,²⁰ supernatural and religious aesthetics and ideas, such as gods and reincarnation, informed by ideas from Buddhism, Shintoism and other mythical, religious, sacred and supernatural narratives, and also a reflection of the author’s ideology and socio-cultural context.

Genre, Gender and Romance

As Napier notes, fantasy often reflects a diverse and complex relationship to the ‘real’ world, offering perspectives that vary from escapism, compensation, resistance, transgression or subversion, but ultimately stems from a conscious departure from reality as “realism no longer seems to satisfy or give meaning in an increasingly complex world.”²¹ This article examines the tensions that develop in the negotiations in the crafting of a utopian society in *isekai* narratives, and navigate between reflecting the ‘real’ or reinventing the fantastical. Do these texts choose to reinforce or dismantle gendered expectations, and do *isekai* texts critique, scrutinize or criticise pre-existing frameworks of gender within these fantastical subversions?

¹⁴ Amy Wang, *Searching for Happiness in “Other Worlds” Utopias and Dystopias in Japanese Isekai* (Master’s Thesis: University of Waikato, 2020), pp. 26-31

¹⁵ Barbara Greene, ‘Creation of a New Transcendent: Religious Affordance in Overlord and My Next Life as a Villainess’, In *Exploring Isekai: Mapping Worlds through Anime, Manga, and Light Novels*, eds. William B. Ashbaugh and Shintaro Mizushima (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2026), pp. 197-200.

¹⁶ Greene, ‘Creation of a New Transcendent’, p. 197.

¹⁷ Yoshiko Okuyama, *Japanese Mythology in Film: A Semiotic Approach to Reading Japanese Film and Anime* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2015) pp. x-xi.

¹⁸ Tani Levy, ‘Entering Another World: A Cultural Genre Discourse of Japanese Isekai Texts and Their Origin in Online Participatory Culture’, In *Japan’s Contemporary Media Culture between Local and Global: Content, Practice and Theory*, eds. Martin Roth, Hiroshi Yoshida, and Martin Picard (Heidelberg: CrossAsis-eBooks, 2021), p. 89.

¹⁹ Price, ‘A Survey of the Story Elements of Isekai Manga’, pp. 57-88.

²⁰ Price, ‘A Survey of the Story Elements of Isekai Manga’, pp. 63-72.

²¹ Napier, *The Fantastic in Modern Japanese Literature*, p. 10.

Generally, contemporary Japanese media (such as anime, manga and games) are often marketed towards certain demographics, for example, *shōnen* (少年), aimed at young boys, and *shōjo* (少女), for girls and young women, and *josei* (女性), which is aimed towards adult women.²² This is also evident in the literary culture of *isekai* which is steeped deeply in the media mix fluxes of Japanese media, and in its conception, highly metafictional.²³ Chiefly, many of these narratives are often partially derived from the form and function of Japanese role playing games (JRPG), or utilise them as a template for both the visual aesthetics or the internal mechanics.²⁴ Similarly, *isekai* stories with female protagonists often mimic the structure of *otome* games (乙女ゲーム), games which typically follow a female protagonist primarily establishing romantic relationships with male love interests.²⁵ These games are often created for a gendered audience; as a result, the tropes of the *isekai* story create overlapping appeal for the intended audience. Therefore, exploring the way gender is explored and depicted in the narrative through the features of the protagonists and their interpersonal relationships often illuminates strongly gendered ideas about romance, gender presentation and behaviours.

Julia Bullock states that it is in stories that one finds people grappling with the complexity and representation of gender, in doing so, creating an “imaginative recreation of the process of gender role negotiation”, and often times these narratives become reflective of “philosophies of gender in fictional form.”²⁶ Moreover, *isekai*’s fantastical disconnect from realism allows concepts of gender and sexuality to be exaggerated and hyperbolized in comparison to Japanese media that is grounded in realism. However, statistically, as seen in Price’s finding,²⁷ gender in the *isekai* genre texts (mostly anime) are typically depicted strictly within gender binaries, and the protagonists are consistently heterosexual in their romantic and sexual relationships. However, while a notable amount of *isekai* narratives often present protagonists who are non-human, or experience physical changes in their bodies and gender, there are rare depictions of queer gender identities and sexualities but is severely limited when compared to the overwhelming majority and popularity of cisgendered, heterosexual narratives. Thus, despite the freedom for many authors to create stories that challenge or depart from realistic depictions or conceptions of gender, many narratives continue to explore gender as firmly rooted within a cisgendered, heterosexual socio-cultural worldview.

Moreover, a majority of these narratives, as seen in the case studies below, often uphold gender stereotypes with didactic undertones for its audience. Intriguingly, even when *isekai* narrative worlds can lend itself to creating liminal circumstances where bodies are often altered and changed and these texts are given free reign when subverting and transgressing the burdens of the ‘real’ world and its expectations, there are still narratives that choose not to be subversive, or to escape the ideological trappings of their realities. Much like Napier’s²⁸ argument that the elements of the fantastical create a paradoxical genre, *isekai* similarly reflects

²² Grace En-Yi Ting, ‘Gender, Manga, and Anime’, in *The Routledge Companion to Gender and Japanese Culture*, eds Jennifer Coates, Lucy Fraser, and Mark Pendleton (New York: Routledge, 2020), pp. 311-319.

²³ Levy, ‘Entering Another World’, p. 103.

²⁴ Levy, ‘Entering Another World’, p. 103.

²⁵ Price, ‘A Survey of the Story Elements of Isekai Manga’, pp. 66-67.

²⁶ Julia Bullock, *The Other Women's Lib: Gender and Body in Japanese Women's Fiction* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2010), p. 9.

²⁷ Price, ‘A Survey of the Story Elements of Isekai Manga’, p. 80.

²⁸ Napier, *The Fantastic in Modern Japanese Literature*, pp. 6-10.

this inconsistency, it is a narrative which is built on anxieties and uncertainties, and seeks to resolve, but its attempt to “compensate for a lack resulting from cultural constraints: it is a literature of desire which seeks that which is experienced as absence and loss.”²⁹ As a result, it is clear that in its attempt to compensate for this failing, it collapses in on itself, and relies on old ideals of gender and gendered performances from their original socio-cultural contexts. Even when given the opportunity through the creation of an otherworld to untether themselves, the following narratives do not challenge gendered expectations, rather, they remake and reshape a fictionalized ideal, however, perhaps it is in its complicity towards gender stereotypes that it addresses the persistently real anxieties surrounding gender and its performances that it attempts to alleviate through its narrative.

In *Seijo no Maryoku wa Bannō Desu*, the female protagonist Sei Takanashi is used to explore ideas of the ‘ideal woman’, female empowerment and achieving happiness through a female lens, whereas *Arifureta Shokugyō de Sekai Saikyō*, explores the presentation of hegemonic masculinity and how ideas of social dominance, power and success is encapsulated in the male protagonist Hajime Nagumo. This article uses close textual analysis of the case studies, focusing on constructions of gender through the narrative. Stuart Hall’s framework of encoding/decoding was employed to analyse the texts, highlighting how ideologies, including those about gender and sexuality, are proliferated to the audience. Both case studies, *Seijo no Maryoku wa Bannō Desu* and *Arifureta Shokugyō de Sekai Saikyō*, were chosen due to their commercial success with target audiences, both domestically and internationally, and their thematic similarities and narrative overlaps with other works in the same genre. Both stories originated from the website *Shōsetsuka ni Narō* (小説家になろう), a self-publishing website which is often based on structured plots and templates with original characters, and received enough success to gain multiple seasons of anime adaptations.³⁰

Exploring the Feminine in *Seijo no Maryoku wa Bannō Desu* (聖女の魔力は万能です)

In this case study, a close examination of the anime *Seijo no Maryoku wa Bannō Desu* illuminates how the narrative reinforces the Japanese concept of the ideal woman and how empowerment and strength is found in complying with stereotypical ideas of femininity. Originally written as a light novel, and then adapted into a manga and anime, the story follows the protagonist, Sei Takanashi, an office worker who is summoned into another world as the Saint Hero who will rescue the new world from the dangers of ‘miasma’, and monsters who threaten the kingdom. In the narrative, the story encodes ideas of the ‘ideal woman’, through focuses on Sei, her personal qualities, and her relationships with the people around her.

The idea of Japanese femininity was originally founded on the Confucian teachings of the *ryōsai kenbo* (良妻賢母), or a good wife and wise mother,³¹ relegating the role of the woman

²⁹ Quoted in Napier, *The Fantastic in Modern Japanese Literature*, p. 8

³⁰ Giovanni Tagliamonte and Yaochong Yang, ‘Isekai: Tracing Interactive Control in Non-Interactive Media’, in *Paratextualizing Games*, eds. Benjamin Beil, Gundolf S. Freyermuth and Hanns Christian Schmidt (Bielefeld: transcript Verlag 2021), pp. 343-346.

³¹ Yoshiko Matsumoto, ‘Alternative Femininity: Personae of Middle-aged Mothers’, in *Japanese Language, Gender, and Ideology: Cultural Models and Real People*, eds Shigeeko Okamoto and Janet S. Shibamoto Smith (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), pp. 240-250; Bullock, *The Other Women’s Lib*, p. 2.

as a domestic, nurturing and self-sacrificial figure for both her husband and her children. As explored by Bullock, the idea of femininity was defined in the 1960's in Japan was marked by the nurturing and supportive functions that women provided for men; seen as a complementary opposite to masculinity, where women exhibited 'natural' gendered passive and modest behaviour towards men.³² This attitude towards gender can be conceptualised as depicting femininity as a biologically based difference, positioning the performance of femininity as an inherent bodily concept.³³ Moreover, the rise of a more gendered division of labor in the middle class has profoundly informed notions of masculinity and femininity within Japan.³⁴ Domesticity was often seen as a woman's full time, and eventual endeavour, and while it provided a recourse for women to not be obligated to a lifetime of corporate work, it also meant that women had no choice but to be financially dependent on men.³⁵ More often, it was a societal pattern than women would often enter the workforce and eventually leave in order to fulfil their duties as wives and mothers, otherwise known as *sengyo shufu* (専業主婦), the full time housewife, and resuming work after. As such, unmarried career women, or a married working mother are often seen as performances of transgressive femininity, or oppositional femininity,³⁶ as it is placed in direct opposition with the contemporary ideal, as masculine and feminine traits were understood as opposite sides of the spectrum, and these gendered qualities did not overlap. Therefore, Japanese femininity was defined as a form of 'other-centeredness', requiring passiveness and self-effacing behavior,³⁷ further requiring women to derive self-fulfilment through supporting the needs and interests of others, mostly *vis-a-vis* men.³⁸ As such, features of an 'ideal woman' are often depicted through obedient, submissive, modest, reserved and subservient behaviours.³⁹

Within the show, the transformation of Sei Takanashi presents a narrative of the empowerment of a woman, through placing her in circumstances that allow her to achieve and perform the feminine ideal. Sei is initially presented as an unmarried, single, middle-aged office worker, and juxtaposed against the younger, striking teenage girl Aira who is summoned alongside her. Introduced as a plain looking woman past her prime, the narrative focuses on portraying the concept of female empowerment through complying with the expectations of femininity, firstly starting with Sei's physical appearance. Following the concept of the 'makeover paradigm' or the improvement of the feminine self through reinventing and transforming their bodies through modified and controlled consumption habits,⁴⁰ the protagonist begins to follow the narrow expectations of feminine attractiveness through the

³² Bullock, *The Other Women's Lib*, pp. 1-12.

³³ Rosalind Gill, 'Postfeminist Media Culture: Elements of a Sensibility', *European Journal of Cultural Studies* vol. 10, no. 2 (2007), p. 613.

³⁴ Justin Charlebois, 'Herbivore Masculinity as an Oppositional Form of Masculinity', *Culture, Society and Masculinities*, vol. 5, no. 1 (2013), p. 92.

³⁵ Charlebois, 'Herbivore Masculinity as an Oppositional Form of Masculinity', p. 94.

³⁶ Bullock, *The Other Women's Lib*, p. 2.

³⁷ Bullock, *The Other Women's Lib*, p. 2.

³⁸ Bullock, *The Other Women's Lib*, p. 2.

³⁹ Momoko Nakamura, *Gender, Language and Ideology: A Genealogy of Japanese Women's Language* (Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 2014), pp. 131-144; Natalia Konstantinovskaia, 'Creation of Femininity in Japanese Televised "Beauty Ads": Traditional Values, Kawaii Cuteness, and a Dash of Feminism', *Gender and Language*, vol. 14, no. 3 (2020), pp. 305-310.

⁴⁰ Gill, 'Postfeminist Media Culture', pp. 147-160.

routines of self-policing and ‘remodelling’ the self. While she is initially described as “gloomy”, with messy, unkempt hair and glasses, suggested to be the Prince’s initial reason for her dismissal, the rest of the show sees her physical transformation to a more conventionally attractive woman, with rounded, softer eyes, long hair, and more suitably feminine attire. Moreover, her magical powers are an inherent part of her character, and instead of a physical removal of her glasses, her body repairs itself, and she no longer requires glasses (a common motif of makeover narratives). Moreover, male characters, while discussing her, describe her as becoming ‘prettier’.



Figure 1. Screenshots from *Seijo no Maryoku wa Bannō Desu* (Images used under Fair Use).⁴¹

Although the narrative frames this transformation as an empowering change for the protagonist, demonstrating the increased appeal and fulfillment it provides her internally and externally, it presents a compliant case of submissive femininity. While Sei initially is set up as an oppositional form of femininity, she is celebrated and rewarded for conforming, whether intentionally or not, with increasingly restrictive requirements for female appearances. It stresses the case that women should be “deeply invested in achieving an illusory identity defined according to a rigidly enforced scale of feminine attribute” in order to succeed, or to even achieve happiness.⁴² Throughout the show, Sei’s physical appearance is reflective of ideal feminine Japanese features, with a thin, slender body, pale skin, and soft spoken, high pitched voice - aligning with subservient, innocent and weak behaviors that are expected of women.⁴³ Laura Miller notes, the transformative body of a woman is not simply about change, but changes within the body often encompasses significant symbolic meaning about class and status too.⁴⁴ While Sei’s happiness is comparatively more progressive than the original narratives of *shoujo* mangas, showing happiness being only achievable when one is “loved by a wonderful man” and an ideal (monogamous) marriage, as Sei has accomplishments outside of her romantic preoccupations, it nevertheless feeds into traditional ideas of *shoujo* love

⁴¹ Shōta Ihata (Dir.), *Seijo no Maryoku wa Bannō Desu* [The Saint's Magic Power Is Omnipotent] (Diomedéa: Crunchyroll, 2021).

⁴² Angela McRobbie, *The Aftermath of Feminism: Gender, Culture and Social Change* (London: Sage Publications, 2009), p. 120.

⁴³ Kanako Ando, Francesca E. Giorgianni, Elisa S. Danthinne, and Rachel F. Rodgers, ‘Beauty Ideals, Social Media, and Body Positivity: A Qualitative Investigation of Influences on Body Image among Young Women in Japan’, *Body Image*, vol. 38, no. 1 (2021), pp. 358-366.

⁴⁴ Laura Miller, *Beauty Up: Exploring Contemporary Japanese Body Aesthetics* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), pp. 1-18.

fantasies, ordinary Japanese girls falling in love with Western appearing men with pale hair and big eyes.⁴⁵

Moreover, while Sei is also revealed to be the strongest ‘saint’, with incomparable powers of purification that the kingdom relies on her for, despite her power, she is still rendered a passive and weak figure for a majority of the show. Her ‘Saint Hero’ powers are rooted in love, more specifically, her romantic love for her romantic interest and eventual fiancé Albert Hawke, but her powers do not extend to wielding physical strength, but rather as an internal biological manifestation, as a wave of light that emanates from within her body that purifies the monsters, or miasma, threatening the country. While her powers provide her with a measure of autonomy in allowing her to be powerful, it is crucial to see how Sei’s powers are located internally, troublingly articulating a tenuous link between female body, gender, biology and even destiny.⁴⁶ It moreover reinforces the idea that women’s inherent biological nature is protective and nurturing to men, as Sei is often only directly protecting the men around her, who also care for and protect her in turn.⁴⁷ Furthermore, Sei is often seen engaging in domestic and stereotypically feminine activity, such as making cosmetics, gardening, and cooking. As such, Sei can only extend herself to her full potential when she plays her feminine role, and allows men to play theirs as a more aggressive provider and protector.

However, it also suggests that in order to be the ‘ideal woman’, one needs to submit to a man and through surrendering, submitting and depending on men will allow women to fully be liberated and empowered, and that women should be weaker than men in order to attain love and marriage.⁴⁸ This furthermore reflects a more traditional view of women as the ‘natural’ complement to men.⁴⁹ Moreover, a notable focus is placed on Sei’s personal life in the second season, after she is presented to the kingdom as the official Saint of the country, all the noblemen around her conspire to talk about her marriageability and to wed her off as soon as possible since her duties as a Saint are completed, mirroring the expectations of feminine domesticity and eventual dependence on a husband,⁵⁰ despite Sei’s freedom of autonomy at this point in the show (especially regarding her desire to have her own hobbies), Sei exhibits little resistance to this idea. Therefore, while she expresses a slight unhappiness about other people meddling in her personal affairs, the broader consequences of her inevitable future as a wife under the demands of society is troubling, yet passed over by the show itself.

To further showcase Sei’s positive characteristics as a proper woman, she is juxtaposed against Aira Misono, another woman who is summoned with Sei. Often, the idea of the ‘good’ woman who exercises proper autonomy, choice and self improvement are often contrasted against the ‘vilification’ of a woman who has not made the correct choices.⁵¹ One of the plot

⁴⁵ Junko Saeki, ‘Beyond the Geisha Stereotype: Changing Images of “New Women” in Japanese Popular Culture’, in *A New Japan for the Twenty-First Century: An Inside Overview of Current Fundamental Changes and Problems*, ed. Rien T. Segers (London: Routledge, 2008), p. 188.

⁴⁶ Bullock, *Other Women’s Lib*, p. 5.

⁴⁷ While none of the other main male characters challenge or vie for Sei’s romantic attention throughout the anime, it is explicitly explored in the potential of other background characters pursuing Sei’s hand in marriage. This is presented as unwanted from Sei’s perspective, and portrayed as a threat against Albert Hawke’s role as Sei’s primary love interest.

⁴⁸ Saeki, ‘Beyond the Geisha Stereotype’, p. 188.

⁴⁹ Bullock, *Other Women’s Lib*, pp. 2-8

⁵⁰ Bullock, *Other Women’s Lib*, pp. 27-30

⁵¹ Bullock, *Other Women’s Lib*, p. 11; Saeki, ‘Beyond the Geisha Stereotype’, p. 193.

complications follows the story of Aira, who was chosen by the Prince as the ‘Saint Hero’ due to her appearance being younger and more physically attractive than Sei. Despite Aira being under the direct control of the Prince and having little to no autonomy over her living conditions or actions, she is bullied and mocked by women at school because she is ‘improperly close’ to the men, who are already engaged. In spite of Aira’s helplessness and lack of autonomy, the narrative punishes her for her lack of self-regulation and self-policing *vis-a-vis* men. Comparatively, Sei is chastised by another woman for her ‘inappropriate behaviour’ after showing her bare legs and feet in front of men, and following this incident, Sei takes extra care in her behaviour around men, such as dressing conservatively and not associating too closely with men. As reflected in Gill’s frameworks, these examples clearly show how women are required to work and transform themselves, to self-regulate their conduct and are still expected to present their actions as freely chosen.⁵² Sei, rather than being pressured by external influences, is shown to have ‘chosen’ to follow the status quo, and submits herself to social norms, lest she is punished for her resistance. Through this quasi-didactic presentation, it highlights the contrast between a ‘good woman’, and the consequences women must face when they do not practice self-surveillance around men.⁵³

While broader shoujo shows and narratives often play and negotiate with traditional gender roles and norms, undeniably functioning as an empowering experience for women in depicting them with a measure of agency and power, it also fails to fully challenge other aspects these stereotypes, shackling women to prescribed norms of performative femininity.⁵⁴ Evidently, the show *Seijo no Maryoku wa Bannō Desu* presents a story of idealised femininity, emphasising the importance of the passive, nurturing and protective role that women must play, and the happiness and fulfilment women can achieve in transforming from an unloved, single working woman, to a woman who excels in domesticity whilst nurturing and providing for male lovers and mentors. Thus, while depicted as a positive and affirming change for the protagonist, it is this form of obliging “emphasized femininity” is truly complicit in reinforcing and reproducing subordination that is aimed toward encouraging and “accommodating the interests and desires of men.”⁵⁵

Exploring Masculinity in *Arifureta Shokugyō de Sekai Saikyō* (ありふれた職業で世界最強)

In *Arifureta Shokugyō de Sekai Saikyō* (henceforth referred to as *Arifureta*), the narrative explores and examines the way masculinity is presented through the protagonist, Hajime Nagumo and shaped by Japanese cultural ideals and concepts of masculinity. Drawing on Connell’s⁵⁶ ideas of hegemonic masculinity, this concept is defined as an abstract ideal supported by society, which values a perfect, unachievable form of masculinity. While men in

⁵² Gill, ‘Postfeminist Media Culture’, pp. 610- 626.

⁵³ Bullock, *Other Women’s Lib*, pp. 1-12

⁵⁴ Fusami Ogi, Lucy Fraser, Isabelle Bettridge and Liisa Kuru, ‘Beyond Borders: Shōjo Manga and Gender’, *U.S.-Japan Women’s Journal*, vol. 54 (2018), pp. 89-93.

⁵⁵ R. W. Connell, *Gender and Power* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1987), p. 183.

⁵⁶ R. W. Connell and James W. Messerschmidt, ‘Hegemonic Masculinity: Rethinking the Concept’, *Gender & Society*, vol. 19, no. 6 (2005), pp. 829-850.

the real world often attempt and fail to perform hegemonic male identities,⁵⁷ it is within the fictional, fluid spatiality of the *isekai* narrative which allows for the ease in which imperfect things can be rendered in its abstract form. Further, in line with Judith Butler's conceptualization of gender as a cultural construct, it is a "repeated stylization of the body",⁵⁸ popular media provides a 'gendered script' in how hegemonic masculinity reinforces the legitimacy of male dominance over women.⁵⁹ As such, the male protagonist, Hajime, within the narrative, is able to express and embody aspects of hegemonic masculinity from a male perspective, in exerting dominance over men and women, through his body, his sexual prowess, and his ability to provide and protect.

In Japan, the enduring sociocultural framework for hegemonic masculinity, or the ideal man, was informed by the 'salaryman' (サラリーマン) model,⁶⁰ conceptualising the 'ideal man' as one who is able to support his family, and excels in the competitive nature of his job, rendering him more prestigious and elite than others. While the 'salaryman' has largely lost its relevance after the economic shifts during the 1990's, this idea still underpins many ideas around contemporary concepts of Japanese masculinity, such as determining a man's success as being the breadwinner and head of a family, and ensuring the financial stability and general wellbeing of his household.⁶¹ Chiefly, being a 'good man' meant that one needed to be economically and biologically successful in order to become a fully fledged member of society (*shakaijin*).⁶² However, in light of emerging alternate forms of masculinity, contemporary ideas of being 'truly' masculine became extrapolated to the idea of competence and control over the self and others, and the need to reassert these gendered behaviours and characteristics within social interactions, especially between male-female interactions.⁶³ Thus, contemporary and alternative interpretations of ideal masculinity allow men to focus on popularity (*moteru*), emphasising the more attractive one's mental state and body, the more success and fulfilment is found in love, relationships and sexual partnerships with women or found in physicality.⁶⁴ As explored by gender is often rendered as a relational category, and investigating how women are constructed and their interactions with men highlight how masculinity is being framed. The predominant forms of masculinity emerging since the 1990's, as discussed by Saladin is the *gyaru-o* form of masculinity, a more aggressive form of masculinity in contrast to the herbivore

⁵⁷ Romit Dasgupta, *Re-reading the Salaryman in Japan: Crafting Masculinities* (New York: Routledge, 2013), pp. 7-22; Ronald Saladin, *Young Men and Masculinities in Japanese Media: (Un-)Conscious Hegemony* (Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan 2019), pp. 1-10, 63-95.

⁵⁸ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (London: Routledge, 2007), p. 45.

⁵⁹ Esther De Dauw and Daniel J. Connell (eds), *Toxic Masculinity: Mapping the Monstrous in Our Heroes* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2020), pp. 4-5.

⁶⁰ Dasgupta, *Re-reading the Salaryman in Japan*, pp. 101-110; Saladin, *Young Men and Masculinities in Japanese Media*, p. 8.

⁶¹ Annette Schad-Seifert, 'Dynamics of Masculinities in Japan: Comparative Perspectives on Men's Studies', in *Gender Dynamics and Globalisation: Perspectives on Japan Within Asia*, eds Claudia Derichs and Susanne Kreitz-Sandberg (Berlin: Lit Verlag, 2007), pp. 33-44.

⁶² Dasgupta, *Re-reading the salaryman in Japan*, p. 58.

⁶³ Masako Ishii-Kuntz, 'Balancing Fatherhood and Work: Emergence of Diverse Masculinities in Contemporary Japan', in *Men and Masculinities in Contemporary Japan: Dislocating the Salaryman Doxa*, eds James E. Roberson and Nobue Suzuki (London: Routledge Curzon, 2003), pp. 212-213; Saladin, *Young Men and Masculinities in Japanese Media*, p. 130

⁶⁴ Tom Gill, 'When Pillars Evaporate: Structuring Masculinity on the Japanese Margins', in *Men and Masculinities in Contemporary Japan: Dislocating the Salaryman Doxa*, eds James E. Roberson and Nobue Suzuki (London: RoutledgeCurzon, 2003), p. 151.

man, or the *soshoku-kei danshi*.⁶⁵ *Gyaru-o* men focus heavily on their eye-catching and distinct appearances, and also seek to be ‘*charai*’, or to be as flirtatious and to gain as many sexual partners in order to demonstrate their capacity in “controlling the opposite sex.”⁶⁶ In this framework of masculinity, women are often (graphically and explicitly) depicted as a tool in which to achieve sexual satisfaction, and are rendered passive, and described as either objects for sexual satisfaction, or even described as ‘prey.’⁶⁷



Figure 2. Screenshots from *Arifureta: From Commonplace to World's Strongest* (Images used under fair use).⁶⁸

In *Arifureta*, Hajime’s physical condition epitomises this through his physical transformation as he sheds his weak, passive and emasculated body for a stronger, more aggressive image of masculinity. In the opening of the show, he is depicted as a helpless and frail character, cursed with a weak ability, unable to stand up against his classmates who have gained stronger, physical combat abilities. In social interactions with his classmates, he is bullied and harassed by his male classmates, and in his powerlessness, is further emasculated when he needs to be protected by his female classmates. His original physical appearance was of a childlike, small boy with large eyes and a soft, timid, high pitched voice, however, in tandem with his growing powers and skillsets, his transformed body is physically stronger, becoming more muscular and taller, mutated white hair with red eyes and his voice and speech becoming deeper, rougher and more aggressive. Similarly, like the aesthetic value of female bodies, the upkeep of male bodies similarly codifies messages about one’s superior status and masculinity,⁶⁹ showcasing the capabilities of male bodies through biological changes and presenting groomed, fit male bodies as the pinnacle of strength and robustness.

Furthermore, the concept of ‘dominance’, expanded upon by Nemoto is “the man’s power and authority over other men and also sustains men’s collective dominance over women.”⁷⁰ This is further explored with how Hajime’s enhanced physical abilities are contrasted against the powers of other men around him. While Hajime’s original powers are described as ‘transmutation’, a non-combat ability that is looked down upon as inferior within

⁶⁵ Saladin, *Young Men and Masculinities in Japanese Media*.

⁶⁶ Saladin, *Young Men and Masculinities in Japanese Media*, p. 92.

⁶⁷ Saladin, *Young Men and Masculinities in Japanese Media*, p. 148.

⁶⁸ Shirakome Ryou, *Arifureta: From Commonplace to World's Strongest* (White Fox: Asread, Crunchyroll, 2019).

⁶⁹ Saladin, 2019, 88-95

⁷⁰ Kumiko Nemoto, *Too Few Women at the Top: The Persistence of Inequality in Japan* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2016), p. 131.

the new world, it is the only power that is able to allow him to create new forms of technology unseen in the otherworld, Tortus. His main weapon of choice, unlike the medieval, fantasy aesthetics of Tortus' weapons, such as swords and bows, is a gun, and is something that only he is capable of producing due to his unique power. The juxtaposition of firearms, guns and military tanks, further emphasizes the aggressively violent and militaristic strength Hajime is capable of, contrasting the almost primitive choice of melee weapons within the world against the advanced technological progress Hajime is capable of creating. Moreover, the use of the *isekai* setting manifests Hajime's 'control' and power into physical form, using role playing game (RPG) status menus. This visual clearly quantifies Hajime's strength and competence, listing his increased strength, magic and other unique abilities in comparison to his past self, but also clearly quantifying his superiority against other men.

The original cause for Hajime's downfall is Daisuke Hiyama, a classmate who often bullied and harassed Hajime, and eventually conspired to sabotage and cause Hajime's death, eventually revealed to be linked to Daisuke's jealousy of the relationship between Hajime and Kaori, a fellow classmate who eventually becomes one of Hajime's many lovers and wives. While Daisuke is originally given the job⁷¹ of Light Warrior, with more physical and magical skills than Hajime, he becomes inferior to Hajime's power in his personal quantifiable status, in combat, and also in romance. Similarly, Hajime becomes more powerful than the hero job class, meant to be the strongest skill set of the summoned group. This class was attributed to Kouki Amanogawa, who is depicted as an attractive man with all rounded talents, capable in both his studies, sports and also with a kind personality. However, while Kouki is depicted as a stereotypical, successful and attractive teenager, arguably, the epitome of ideal masculinity, the story chooses to show a slightly darker, more mature and aggressive form of masculinity as superior. As such, even Kouki is depicted lesser in comparison to Hajime, as when Hajime encounters his classmates again, they instead become dependent on his strength for protection and safety, a reversal of their original roles.⁷² As such, all the alternate forms of masculinity, and thus other men, are shown to be subservient and inferior to Hajime. As such, softer forms of masculinity are depicted as a form of weakness in the new world, and the aggressive, powerful form masculinity is the only way to become the 'ideal man'.

In line with this, Hajime's newfound status and dominance over other men also reinforces the submission of women. Much of this performance of dominance is done through male-female relationships, with a contemporary emphasis shifted towards achieving sexual success with women.⁷³ In the show, Hajime's relationships can be considered a 'harem' (ハーレム), a genre where a protagonist has multiple love interests or sexual partners within a heterosexual framework. In the anime, Hajime initially develops a romantic and sexual

⁷¹ Within RPG mechanics, the term job classes, or character classes that are either assigned or chosen by the player, and it comes with predetermined and specialized skills. For example, mages are usually given more magical abilities, with a strong affinity for certain types of magic, while warriors are often given more melee skills with physical skills. Mages are often less capable of melee fighting, whereas warriors may have a low magic capability, and as a result, each class is often relegated to certain tasks and roles.

⁷² In the plot of the light novel, it becomes clear that the summoned heroes who were meant to defend the Heiligh Kingdom against the demons and monsters are actually part of the main antagonist, the False God's games, and lose all credibility as heroes. Hajime and his companions end up becoming revered as the 'real' heroes, or saviours of the Heiligh, and by extension, all of Tortus.

⁷³ Saladin, *Young Men and Masculinities in Japanese Media*, pp. 88-95.

relationship with Yue, a vampire who becomes his first wife, but quickly gains the affections of multiple women, including other non-human (but humanoid presenting) women. In the light novel, the epilogue reveals that Hajime married eight women, including a princess of the Heiligh kingdom,⁷⁴ and his classroom teacher. Even the narrative's insistence on including non-human women, such as dragons with human forms, emphasises how all women, no matter how unattainable they may seem, can be 'won' like a sexual conquest, through the performance of dominant and aggressive masculine power. Moreover, the narrative here encodes ideas about how to achieve sexual success with women, through the attainment of power, and the subsequent dominance over men. Feasey states, despite the changing aesthetic of masculinity favouring the 'everyday everyman' to appeal to a broader male audience, the media still deliberately reinforces stereotypical ideas about sex and gender stereotypes for heterosexual men, specifically about sexual attraction and performance.⁷⁵

This is compounded through the exclusive presentation of women as stereotypically beautiful, attractive and slender "figures of femininity,"⁷⁶ amplified through the male gaze, where the hypersexualization and objectification of women is commonplace, such as the frequent display of Yue's naked body, or the provocative and revealing clothing of Shea and Tio (Hajime's other wives), who all have conventionally attractive bodies. The animation, in the opening theme, focuses on the female body, foregrounding the breasts and buttocks of the women, while Hajime himself is dressed and shown displaying his powers and abilities. Moreover, even in typical scenes, the frequency of 'fan service', or a "random and gratuitous display" of sexually suggestive visuals,⁷⁷ and despite showcasing the abilities and powers of the women, it continues to objectify them through glimpses and shots of female bodies, foregrounding their bodies and reinforcing women as objects for sexual consumption and viewing. Therefore, in its presentation, it implies the role of a woman, regardless of her individual merits, is relegated to being a tool for a man's sexual desire, and femininity here expressed as a compliant, accommodating subordinate in contrast to the active and powerful man.⁷⁸ Despite each female character having some measure of autonomy and power, the narrative also insists that each woman is dependent on the protagonist in some crucial way, such as Yue's gratitude to Hajime for freeing her, or Kaori when she is possessed. Evidently, the idea of sexual dominance over women is clearly depicted here through the use of the 'harem' genre, and the sexual objectification of women through their designs, narrative arcs and the show's use of the male gaze.⁷⁹

As such, it is clear that the notion of masculinity as presented in *Arifureta* is one that is drawn directly from the Japanese cultural ideas of hegemonic masculinity. While men in reality are unable to achieve these feats, it is through the fantastical nature of an *isekai* narrative that

⁷⁴ It is simply known as 'the Kingdom' in the show, as it is the most prominent kingdom and also the initial setting and focus of the narrative.

⁷⁵ Rebecca Feasey, 'Spray More, Get More: Masculinity, Television Advertising and the Lynx Effect', *Journal of Gender Studies*, vol. 18, no. 4 (2009), pp. 357-360.

⁷⁶ Feasey, 'Spray More, Get More', p. 365.

⁷⁷ Keith Russell, 'The Glimpse and Fan Service: New Media, New Aesthetics', *The International Journal of the Humanities: Annual Review*, vol. 6, no. 5 (2008), p. 107.

⁷⁸ Saladin, *Young Men and Masculinities in Japanese Media*, pp. 88-95.

⁷⁹ Furthermore, it can be argued that the use of the male gaze causes the audiences themselves to become complicit in sexually objectifying women in the mere act of viewing the show.

the protagonist is able to achieve this abstract ideal. In the narrative, Hajime begins to assert his dominance over men through his capabilities and physical transformation, and similarly, exerts his dominance over women. In addition to this, his increased desirability is able to reaffirm both sexual success and the submission of the women around him, and the text further reaffirms this by repeatedly objectifying and sexualizing the bodies of the women around him.⁸⁰ Rather than challenging, or subverting the performance of masculinity in this world, Arifureta seeks to reaffirm and re-establish the ideal form of hegemonic masculinity, further colored by the contemporary influences of gyaru-o masculinity and their sexual aggression and popularity with women,⁸¹ while still underpinning the salaryman ideal with Hajime's ability to protect and provide for multiple women, most of which ultimately become his wives.⁸²

Conclusion

This article has explored the features and aspects of the *isekai* genre, demonstrating its ability to effectively address and respond to socio-cultural and individual concerns. For many, *isekai* narratives are a way to facilitate an author's desire to explore one's physical, emotional and social desires in a world that is ultimately, one that is removed from the constraints of reality that they face. *Isekai* narratives often also employ supernatural, sacred or religious narratives, tropes or elements, and often in utilising these, can also be seen as a type of contemporary myth, or modern fairy tale that offers a religious-like catharsis for its audiences due to its otherworldliness, and pre-occupation with what lies beyond 'this life.'⁸³ Through anticipating idealized or fictional spaces that are informed by the plurality of religious, mythological and sacred stories and ideologies. However, these stories often ultimately reflect or address significant and meaningful ways in which the protagonists are able to achieve feats and succeed at things they were unable to in their previous lives, especially regarding the performance of gender and gender roles.⁸⁴

In both *Seijo no Maryoku wa Bannō Desu* and *Arifureta Shokugyō de Sekai Saikyō*, the texts present the gendered tensions within these texts, and ultimately choose not to critique or dismantle the gendered expectations of their old lives, rather both protagonists use their summoned lives in order to achieve and fulfil gendered ideals, and for the latter, it is only achievable in a fictional, idealized world. The *isekai* narratives of *Seijo no Maryoku wa Bannō Desu* and *Arifureta Shokugyō de Sekai Saikyō* recreate pre-existing socio-cultural stereotypes, and comply with ideas of heteronormativity as shaped by Japanese socio-cultural expectations. In *Seijo no Maryoku wa Bannō Desu*, Sei Takanashi's personal qualities are drawn from the *ryōsai kenbo*, Japanese ideal of femininity, as her personal powers and strengths are dependent on her relationship with her male love interest. Moreover, the narrative emphasises conservative ideas of Japanese femininity can be transposed and amplified into a fictional setting, including ideas of postfeminism through Sei's femininity as an inherent, bodily

⁸⁰ Feasey, 'Spray More, Get More', pp. 363-367.

⁸¹ Saladin, *Young Men and Masculinities in Japanese Media*, pp. 88-95, 235-252

⁸² Dasgupta, *Re-reading the Salaryman in Japan*, p. 5.

⁸³ Napier, *The Fantastic in Modern Japanese Literature*, pp. 6-10; Price, 'A Survey of the Story Elements of Isekai Manga', pp. 66-67.

⁸⁴ Levy, 'Entering Another World', p. 103.

concept, the use of the ‘makeover paradigm’, and the contrast in narrative arcs between her and Aira Misono.⁸⁵ In *Arifureta Shokugyō de Sekai Saikyō*, masculinity is explored through Hajime’s transformation, emphasising the value of hegemonic masculinity and how it is shaped by emerging forms of hegemonic masculinity in contemporary Japanese society. Additionally, ideas of *gyaru-o* masculinity as a form of dominance over women is also seen through Hajime’s sexual prowess, reinforced by the show’s objectification of its female characters.⁸⁶ Overall both narratives, through the processes of encoding, have presented an affirmation of gender norms concerning femininity and masculinity informed by a Japanese context. In its affirmation, it mollifies and assuages concerns about gendered anxieties through reinforcing and presenting the achievement of pre-existing gender ideals even within a fantastical otherworld.

⁸⁵ Bullock, *The Other Women’s Lib*, 1-12; Saeki, ‘Beyond the geisha stereotype’, pp. 188-193; Gill, ‘Postfeminist Media Culture’, p. 613.

⁸⁶ Saladin, *Young Men and Masculinities in Japanese Media*, pp. 88-95, 235-252.