

media. For example, the French novel, *The Perfect Nanny*, by Leila Slimani, is a *Roman à Clef* (a novel about real-life events with the overlay of fiction) that appears to be based loosely on news stories of a real murder case in New York City in 2012. It is important for forensic psychiatrists to be aware of these stories, as they may distort the views of the lay public (and potential future jurors), and to be aware of novels that purport to be fiction yet appear to be sensationalized portrayals of complex events occurring at the intersection of psychiatry and the law.

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## Stigma, Shame, and Transcendence in Japanese Cinema

*Sweet Bean*, Directed and written by Naomi Kawase, adapted from the novel *Sweet Bean Paste* by Durian Sukegawa. Released in Japan May 30, 2015.

*37 Seconds*. Directed and written by Hikari. Released in the United States January 31, 2020.

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“Don’t tell me what I *can’t* do!”—the battle cry of those pinched by the perception of disability, a social-legal construct. Previous reviews of films from France<sup>1</sup> and the United States<sup>2</sup> have focused on overcoming disability and adapting to differentness. In two award-winning films, set in contemporary Japan, we see the stigma of physical disease and how the affected individuals transcend it. While they are neither forensic nor psychiatric, the sensitive treatments of the characters provide guidance on the bread-and-butter work we do: explaining individuals’ adaptations for use in civil and criminal settings.

*Sweet Bean*, beautifully filmed in Higashimurayama, within greater Tokyo, takes us to a snack shop on the ground floor of an apartment building. The shopkeeper, Sentaro, makes one food item, *dorayaki*: two pancakes with sweet bean paste between them. Sentaro works hard and has a small following of teenaged girls, including Wakana, who is about to drop out of school. Something is missing from his life, and he cannot accept being a role model for Wakana. One spring day, Tokue shows up, a timid 76-year-old woman with gnarled hands. It appears she has arrived by chance, as she looks up through the cherry blossoms to the heavens, grateful. Poetic, she takes in the world sensually, uncritically. She sees Sentaro’s help-wanted sign and expresses interest in his work, but he is indifferent to her, unable to see her value through his misery. He tries to talk her out of it, saying the work is too hard. After he gives her a free *dorayaki*, she vows to return. She does, critical of his bean paste, saying she has made it for 50 years. He is unrelenting about hiring her. Tokue leaves him a small package and walks away.

In the package is bean paste. He has never seen “chunky” bean paste, which, after licking it from his finger twice, starts to change his world. Later, having tempura with Wakana, he admits that Tokue’s

filling was “incredible.” He is great at pancake making, but he uses commercial bean paste. Tokue’s bean paste is divine. The teenager tells him he should hire her.

Tokue needs to share her gift. We know nothing of her backstory but sense that she and Sentaro could redeem them both by elevating the *dorayaki*. When she returns, Sentaro admits her paste was delicious. She comes aboard, for one-third of the expected wage, to make *dorayaki* with him, taking charge of the filling. He doesn’t know what he is in for as he says, “All I want you to do is that you make the bean paste.” It is a Trojan horse. She downplays the problem with her hands, suggesting he lift the pots.

Once Tokue gets inside, she unfolds a universe Sentaro never imagined—making bean paste from scratch. They are “hosting” the beans, which have traveled a long way from the fields, she tells him. She acts with precision, soaking the beans, boiling them, and sweetening them, using all her senses. Disoriented, Sentaro becomes her apprentice. In a hilarious moment, Tokue, looking into a bubbling pot of beans, says, “Keep up the good work.” When he thanks her, she replies, “I’m talking to the beans.” The camerawork and sound effects are mouth-watering, as Tokue micro-manages her protégé, all for the good.

The bean paste gets made, marries the pancakes, and things look up. Indeed, word gets around, people queue up before the shack opens, and Sentaro sells out. But existence is threatened when a woman comes into the shop, Sentaro’s boss. Someone has rumored that Tokue has leprosy. She asks what would happen if Tokue’s finger fell off. Sentaro remonstrates, but she orders him to fire Tokue. He does not do it. The customers disappear. He gets drunk. Finally, he tells her to take the day off, but she does not return. Stigma and shame have surfaced.

We learn, well into the film, why Sentaro is miserable. He used to manage a pub and, during a bar fight, harmed someone criminally, which sent him to prison and into debt. His boss’s husband paid the debt and put Sentaro into the *dorayaki* shop. He has no self-respect, aware both that the debt will never be repaid and that he does not put love into his craft. Although Tokue and Wakana believe in him, his shame is obvious.

Tokue, it turns out, has lived in an enclave of lepers since childhood and is a widow who did not complete her one pregnancy. Her gnarled hands are not from arthritis and she cannot escape the stigma and

shame of leprosy, even though the 1953 leper law of forced segregation had been vacated for 20 years. Sentaro and Wakana visit her and develop respect for others who are shunned because of their appearance and prejudice. Now that Tokue has taught her bean paste recipe to Sentaro, her work is done. The shop must stay open and Sentaro remains faithful, but the boss dumps him to repurpose the shop for a young man. When Tokue dies, he and Wakana revisit the lepers’ enclave. Since lepers cannot lawfully be buried, a cherry tree has been planted to represent her. In the final scene, Sentaro, feeling whole and empowered, has become a *dorayaki* street vendor, enthusiastically introducing his product to a new generation; Wakana goes back to school.

*37 Seconds* opens with a close-up of a person applying eye makeup and lipstick. Quickly, as the opening credits appear, we see a young woman in a wheelchair riding a commuter train. It is the same woman, Yuma, in her everyday androgynous persona, coming home to a Tokyo neighborhood. Her mother greets her at the station and cheerfully wheels her off. Yuma, as usual, has nothing much to say, her mother laments. At home, Yuma’s mother undresses her and they bathe and soak together. We cannot tell the degree to which mother is babying her daughter, 23, who speaks in a child’s voice.

Yuma is not intellectually disabled. In the next scene, we learn that she is a paid computer-aided illustrator, a manga artist. Manga, incidentally, is a ubiquitous art form in Japan, which may include sexual content. It is a forerunner of the comic book. Working out of her friend’s home, Yuma is an uncredited artist for her friend Sayaka, a YouTube children’s influencer. While Yuma is the creative force behind their collaboration, it is clear that Sayaka wants to keep Yuma in the background, both for her aggrandizement and to not call attention to the disabled artist. Meanwhile, Yuma, played by Mei Kayama, a nonactor with cerebral palsy, wants to sell her comics under her own name.

Yuma yearns to be like other women. On the train, she watches others put on makeup and uses them as models. Her mother protects her from the world and from men, prohibiting her from wearing a dress on a solo trip into Tokyo, because “there are a lot of creeps out there.” This does not dampen Yuma’s spirits as she goes to Sayaka’s book signing toting a bouquet and expecting to share in the glory. Yuma’s name is not in the book. Instead, Sayaka ignores her, as little girls line up to get autographs.

Sayaka lies, saying she works alone, and Yuma is crushed. Back home, flowers still in hand, Yuma lies to her mother, saying the bouquet came from an admirer of her work. Dejected, she pulls out a postcard with a drawing of a man with a girl. As she falls asleep, the drawing turns into an animated cartoon depicting a father and daughter in an affectionate scene. She is awakened by a bubbly Sayaka, who has brought gifts and the news that their comic will be on the cover of the next publication, with the deadline a week away. Sayaka apologizes for her rudeness at the signing, explaining, "You can't just show up like that." Yuma pathetically replies, "I wanted to see what it was like." Sayaka promises her fame, but we sense her insincerity; so does Yuma, who has a different Cinderella story in mind.

Yuma has submitted her work and, in the next scene, gets a call from a man who says it's great but too similar to Sayaka's. She should develop her own style. Yuma, undeterred, spots some adult manga magazines, with drawings of sexualized females drawn for a male audience. She starts making cold calls and, while on hold at *Weekly Boom*, she is intrigued by the sounds of adult sex. She is thrilled to be invited to bring in a work sample. Yuma envisions and creates a science fiction comic, with sexual content only in the context of propagating DNA. She gets herself to the publisher, Ms. Fujimoto, a pleasant and receptive woman. Ms. Fujimoto first takes a few seconds to look at the work, saying it is "pretty good," and then asks Yuma two personal questions: "Why the wheelchair?" and "Have you done it . . . sex?" Yuma, unashamed, replies, "No, never." Ms. Fujimoto figures as much, saying Yuma's sex scenes didn't "feel authentic . . . Imagination alone isn't good enough." Yuma must return when her drawings are informed by experience.

Yuma must adapt. Undaunted, she goes back to her drawing tablet while watching video pornography. She begins to pleasure herself and then decides to take her curiosity on the road. Using online dating, she meets two self-absorbed young men. She asks the third, with an anxious grin, if he would consider having a relationship with "someone like me," adding, "We're just like everybody else." He agrees to a movie date but stands her up. Yuma uses her electric wheelchair to roam Tokyo's back alleys, where she meets a pimp. She timidly asks him to fix her up with a man and they arrange for it at a hotel in an hour. The escort arrives upbeat, but the mood changes when he

sees the wheelchair. After agreeing not to charge extra for the disability, he calls the pimp to complain he was not warned; Yuma overhears. The session proceeds but does not go well, as she has urinary incontinence as he begins to touch her. The gigolo, who has set a timer for 60 minutes, is finished: "I'm not into this kind of thing." She feels freakish, telling him it is her fault, and pays him. Yuma uses the balance of her time to bathe and change, demonstrating she is not as helpless as her mother believes. On the way out, she meets a man in a wheelchair and his female sex surrogate. They model a loving relationship. The woman, Mai, invites Yuma to call her.

When Mai and Yuma get together, it is to look at sex toys and feminine clothing and to get Yuma made up. Yuma gladly takes on Mai as a mentor. When she misses a writing session with Sayaka, her mother gets concerned, flooding her phone with messages. Yuma distances herself from Sayaka and her mother, partying with Mai, drinking, and attending a drag show. Her nosy mother finds her new clothing and, horrified, a dildo (which she had used as a model for drawing). Yuma returns, drunk but self-satisfied, to a confrontational mother, who roars, "You can't live without me!" Mom slaps Yuma and Yuma slaps her with an interpretation: "You're just afraid of being alone. You're too needy! Dad left us because he couldn't stand you." Mom cannot respond, but finds Yuma in a dry bathtub in the morning, having confiscated her phone and padlocked the door. Yuma daydreams by putting herself in the drawing with the man and girl. During a physical therapy session, she elopes, finding Mai, whose young male driver, Toshi, brings her to his place. Mai insists Yuma agree to call her mother, who has already reported a kidnapping.

The final third of the film is Yuma's odyssey. She confides in Toshi that she has never met her father and that she will set out to meet him the next day. He drives her to a seaside location, Yuma clutching the drawing, presumably by her father. She finds a man in the home and learns he is her uncle; her father died five years earlier. The child in the picture is Yuka, Yuma's twin sister, a teacher in Thailand, of whose existence she was unaware. Satisfied she has made progress, she calls her mother to reassure her. Yuma and Toshi pay a surprise visit to Yuka, who talks about their father, an optimistic free spirit. Yuka, pretty and physically intact, suggests that mother and father split up because Yuma was the most important thing

in mom's life. Yuma invites her twin to Japan, and Yuka has a confession: that she knew of Yuma all along, but when she found out that she was disabled, she was afraid to reach out. Yuka, ashamed, bows deeply. That night, Yuma reveals to Toshi the secret of 37 seconds, that she was the second born and didn't breathe for that moment. It could have been the reverse, but she concludes, "I'm glad it was me." Back home, she presents her mother with a sketchbook, with pictures of Yuka: "She wants to meet you," she calmly tells mother, who releases a torrent of shame-filled tears. In the end, Yuma returns to Ms. Fujimoto, the manga publisher, whom she thanks for the guidance. Her new drawings, however, are sex-free, but the publisher is delighted to open up a new audience—women. Yuma has been reborn.

Cultures and laws that promote or permit discrimination based on perceived differences among citizens can be subjected to national shame. The shame is passed on to the targeted individuals and is also borne by secondary victims. As Americans still struggle with guilt and shame over slavery, treatment of indigenous peoples, and the forced internment of ethnic Japanese in America during World War II, Japan too has been processing its history. Japan has been characterized as a "shame culture" since Ruth Benedict wrote about it in the late 1940s,<sup>3</sup> and the matter has been debated<sup>4</sup> and discussed in relation to a culture of shame in Germany in a previous review.<sup>5</sup> In November 2019, Japan's parliament enacted a law to compensate the families of persons with Hansen's disease who were isolated by a law mandating life in sanatoria from 1953 until its repeal in 1996.<sup>6</sup> It followed a lawsuit by families in 2016 (around the time *Sweet Bean* was released), claiming they were the victims of discrimination and prejudice in their own right. Writer and director Naomi Kawase visited the sanatorium she filmed in *Sweet Bean* and secured cooperation from the remaining residents.<sup>7</sup>

Writer and director Hikari asserts that disability is not discussed in Asian countries; hence, her motivation to make the film.<sup>8</sup> Yuma, the main focus of *37*

*Seconds*, represents a familiar subject: a person with different abilities who is held back for cultural reasons. In her case, however, there are local dynamics of intrafamilial and, in her mother's case, intrapsychic, elements of shame. The film is superficially about variability in sexual expression. It aims higher, forcing us to examine what Yuma meekly endorsed: "We're just like everyone else." Yes, but that is only a start. Why *should* she be like everybody else (civil rights aside for the moment)? In *A Beautiful Day in the Neighborhood* (2019), when a psychologically troubled reporter (Matthew Rhys) refers to "[broken] people like me," the character of Mr. Rogers (Tom Hanks) responds, "I've never met anyone like you in my entire life." Right! In *Sweet Bean* and *37 Seconds*, the main characters become individuals by transcending stigma, self-hate, shame, and guilt.

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