



## An Unloving Parenthood: Understanding Narcissistic Parenting through Japanese Pop Culture

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### ABSTRACT

This research discusses narcissistic parenting represented in the comic Fruits Basket by Natsuki Takaya. Narcissistic parenting is a parenting style affected by a parent's narcissism. This parenting style doesn't offer enough space for a child to be themselves. A parent's narcissism causes the parent to inflict physical and emotional abuse against children.

This research is a descriptive qualitative research based on the concept of narcissistic parenting written in *The Narcissistic Family: Diagnosis and Treatment* by Stephanie Donaldson-Pressman and Robert M. Pressman. This research discusses the effect of narcissistic parenting found in children through the relationship between characters in the text.

This research found out that children who survive narcissistic parenting might develop internal problems such as lack of emotional stability, lack of confidence and self-esteem, fragile sense of identity, inappropriate desire to be the center of attention, lack of empathy, grandiosity, and tendency to justify one's wrongdoing and commit blame-shifting.

**KEYWORDS:** narcissism, narcissistic parents, domestic abuse, Japanese pop culture

### I. INTRODUCTION

There are various parenting styles and patterns, depending on the societal norms being enforced in certain ages and regions. For example, parenting style in Asia might show a difference compared to parenting style in Europe. Parenting styles are largely divided into three categories, which are authoritative, permissive, and authoritarian. Asian parents have shown a higher tendency to use authoritarian style, which is a parenting style that emphasizes the expectations parents have towards their children to excel and achieve, particularly in their career and academic life. To make sure that the children will fulfill those expectations, parents with authoritarian parenting style tend to enforce strict control on their children. [1]The control Asian parents have against their children is also supported by the strict generational hierarchy in an Asian family's structure and dynamic.[2]

The authoritarian parenting style is also affected by the *Xiao* (孝) doctrine in Confucianism that rules the relationship between children and their parents, elders, and ancestors.[3] This doctrine emphasizes the importance of respect a child has towards their parents, elders, and ancestors, as well as how a child should conduct themselves in public so that they will not bring shame to their family.[4]

This doctrine also highlights how a child should repay their parents' sacrifice, and one among the things a child can do to repay their parents' kindness is to take care of them when they are no longer able to support and sustain themselves.[5] *Xiao* doctrine also rules about parents' obligations toward their children, but the majority of it consists of norms about a child's obligations towards their parents, elders, and ancestors. [6]

The existence of the *Xiao* doctrine highlights the importance of family structure in Asian society, as well as their tendency to be group-oriented and hierarchical. Every parenting styles have its advantages and disadvantages, yet the emphasis on parents' sacrifice and a child's obligation to fulfill their parents' expectations might create a situation where parents' expectations are placed above a child's needs. One example of such phenomenon can be found in stereotypes of ambitious mothers in Asian society such as Tiger Mom in China or *Kyouiku Mama* (Education Mother) in Japan. Those stereotypes are often placed upon mothers who are overtly ambitious about their child's academic achievements without concern for the risks put on the child's health and development. [7]

Japan is often depicted as a country with a more authoritative parenting style compared to other Asian countries. But it doesn't automatically rule out the possibility of a more authoritarian parenting style being used in Japanese society. Japanese mother is often considered tolerant and indulging mothers, yet they tend to have high expectations of how their child behaves in society. Research by Power et al. In 1992 found that Japanese mothers have a higher tendency to give corporal punishment to their children compared to American mothers.[8] Japanese fathers tend to treat their sons, especially the eldest son, harshly due to the traditional Japanese family system that puts high expectations on the eldest son in the family.[9] This parenting style runs from one generation to another, causing damage to the confidence, self-esteem [10], and behavior [11] of some Japanese children.

Narcissistic parenting style started being discussed during the aftermath of World War II along with the development of knowledge about narcissism and parenting style in the western world. The discourse about narcissistic parenting continues until this very day, although analysis of narcissistic parenting found in fiction as a reflection of real life problems is still rarely found. For example, a scientific paper titled 'The Disguised Cry for Help: Narcissistic Mothers and their Children' by Sidney Love and Yonata Feldman found in the *Psychoanalytic Review* journal released in 1961, discussed how a mother's narcissism affects a child's psychological development and how narcissistic mother can experience psychological healing as the child heals.[12] Another example comes from a scientific paper titled 'The Cracked Mirror: Features of Narcissistic Personality Disorder in Children' by Karen Kernberg Ardentein found in the journal *Psychiatric Annals* released in 2009, which discussed how parents who use narcissistic parenting tend to raise children with narcissistic traits. [13] Although the concept of narcissistic parenting is newly discussed in the academic world, society has been familiar with narcissism in parenting. The familiarity shows in how narcissistic parenting is shown in fiction such as *Carrie* by Stephen King, *Pride and Prejudice* by Jane Austen, and the famous folktale *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, which features a narcissistic mother as the antagonist.

A portrayal of narcissistic parenting in Japanese media can be found in the comic *Fruits Basket*. *Fruits Basket* is a comic series by Natsuki Takaya that tells the story of Tohru Honda, an orphan who found out the secret of the Sohma family, that thirteen members of the family are possessed by Chinese zodiac animals and they can transform into animals that possess them when they are in emotional distress. In her journey, Tohru helps every possessed member of the Sohma family to heal their emotional wound or trauma. One among the Sohma family members possessed by Chinese zodiac animals is Akito Sohma, the family head who is possessed by the God of the Chinese zodiac. Akito is depicted as an abusive and emotionally unstable person who turns out

to be the victim of parental abuse done by her mother, Ren Sohma.

This research aims to explain narcissism in Ren's parenting as well as how her parenting affects Akito's life and behavior, even after she grew into an adult. The author explains Ren's narcissistic parenting through the approach of the psychology of literature as well as scientific theories regarding narcissism, especially on how a parent's narcissistic traits affect their parenting.

## II. BODY TEXT

This research is qualitative and descriptive explorative research. Narcissistic parenting is the unit analysis of this research, and the object of this research is the comic *Fruits Basket* by Natsuki Takaya, translated from Japanese to English. In this research, narcissistic parenting is found in the interpretation of the relationship between characters in the story. The research begins with deciding the research problem, literature review, analysis, and concluding the research results.

This research is done through the approach of the psychology of literature focusing on the concept of narcissistic parenting found in the book *The Narcissistic Family: Diagnosis and Treatment* by Stephanie Donaldson Pressman and Robert M. Pressman supported by other relevant scientific sources.

Narcissistic parenting is a kind of parenting affected by a parent's narcissism or narcissistic personality disorder (NPD). Parents with narcissistic parenting tend to consider their children as an extension of themselves and not as independent individuals. Through narcissistic parenting, children become an instrument to fulfill parents' needs, especially emotional needs.[14] In a family where narcissistic parenting occurs, the dynamic of parent and child becomes reversed. If in a normal family parent is the one who fulfills their child's emotional needs, in a narcissistic family, the child is the one responsible for their parent's emotional needs. This causes the child who survived narcissistic parenting to have little to no opportunity to develop properly and get to know themselves. [15]

There are eight characteristics of parents who use a narcissistic parenting style. Parents who use a narcissistic parenting style tend to use their child for their gain, being overtly critical and controlling of their child, giving their child conditional love and approval, easily angered and provoked, having a lack of empathy, demanding to be their child's priority, feeling jealous, envious, or possessive towards their child, and neglecting their child emotionally, financially, and physically. [16] Aside from those eight characteristics, parents who use narcissistic parenting style also tend to have less than sufficient amount of self-esteem, which caused them to not be able to accept criticism or input without irrational anger. [17]

There are two types of narcissistic parenting, which are overt and covert. [15] Parents who use overt narcissistic

parenting are usually easier to notice because their way to neglect their children is usually more apparent and obvious. Parents with overt narcissistic parenting tend to inflict physical or even sexual abuse on their children. They also have a higher tendency of alcohol and drug use, records or potential of criminality, as well as severe mental illness. The neglected child usually experiences pressure to hide their family situation, as well as to behave so that their parent's emotions will not explode. While parents with covert narcissistic parenting are usually harder to detect because their family tends to seem normal on the outside, with parents who seemingly perform their roles well and children who seemingly have all their needs fulfilled. But the family dynamic occurring in their daily life is affected by parents' narcissism and it affects the emotional and psychological state of the child. For example, parents with covert narcissistic parenting often react to child's attempts to discuss their feeling with anger or negativity. They might also prioritize their life as a couple, leaving their child's needs behind.

A family where narcissistic parenting occurs usually has a set of mechanisms to sustain that parenting style and dynamic. A narcissistic family tends to use passive-aggressive and sarcastic manners in how they communicate. Because of the lack of healthy communication in the family, a couple in a family where narcissistic parenting occurs usually communicates through a third party such as their child. The parents also force their children to pick a side whenever there is a disagreement in the family. The lack of emotional capacity the parents have left the child's emotional need to be heard, understood, respected, and loved left unfulfilled. Fulfillment of the child's need only happens when its fulfillment goes along with the parents' aim or fulfillment of the parents' emotional need. Parents in such families also tend to not respect the child's privacy and boundaries, which results in them acting in an improper manner such as accessing a grownup child's private information, etc. [15]

Narcissistic parenting affects a child's development in various ways, and it doesn't affect every child the same way. A child who survived narcissistic parenting usually encounters problems in their adulthood due to the lack of emotional, physical, and financial safety they received in their childhood. A child who survived narcissistic parenting might have an overwhelming rate of self-awareness and poor ability to understand their feeling, as well as others. [18] They might tend to have a fragile sense of identity and difficulty identifying themselves. [19]

A child raised with narcissistic parenting also tends to have a higher psychological risk. They have a higher possibility of struggling with symptoms of depression or anxiety disorder.[20] They also have a higher possibility of suffering from a psychiatric disorder compared to children raised by non-narcissistic parents.[21] Children of narcissistic parents also tend to have a higher rate of shame associated with their needs and a higher rate of sense of obligation to their parents, or others' happiness and wellbeing.[22] The

high rate of sense of obligation also makes children of narcissistic parents tend to feel that their parents' failure or shortcoming are their faults as their children. [23] In some cases, children raised with narcissistic parenting style adopt their parents' narcissistic traits. This phenomenon is called narcissistic legacy.[24] The generational narcissistic abuse will only be halted when the child can reject the narcissistic values taught by their parents. [18]

### III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

#### A. Character Analysis

Fruits Basket's characters discussed in this research are Ren Sohma, the mother, and Akito Sohma, the daughter.

Ren is depicted as a jealous and envious person. When she was pregnant with Akito, Ren insisted that Akito would be raised as a boy because she was jealous of the attention that her husband, Akira, gave to Akito. It is shown in the quote from a side character, Shigure Sohma, below :

“(About Akito being raised as a boy) But the person who was most crazy over Akito... was Akira. A woman heir would cause problems... Ren had decided beforehand. She was very adamant about it. If the heir was not a boy, she would refuse to deliver the baby. Akira was afraid she meant it, so he accepted. Because she is no longer “first” in Akira's heart, she's hurt...and jealous. Of the child who was promised to be surrounded by love, she's jealous as a woman.” [25]

Ren's narcissism is shown in her envy towards Akito as a woman over the attention that her husband, Akira, gave to her daughter. This scene implies Ren's desire to be the only woman Akira pays attention to, to the point that she considers her daughter a rival over his attention

Ren's envy remains after she gave birth to Akito. In the story, it is depicted that Ren is jealous of the attention that the Sohma family's members and servants gave to Akito. Ren is portrayed as a character who demands to be the center of attention of the entire household, hence she considers Akito as a rival over their attention.

The envy that Ren has towards Akito is shown in these two different scenes. First, Ren refused to embrace Akito, who was still an infant in that scene. Ren stated that the reason she didn't want to embrace her is that she is already loved by everyone in the household, so she wouldn't need her motherly love. That scene is portrayed through this quote, which consists of a conversation between Akira and Ren.

Akira : How come... you won't hold this baby?

Ren : That child is already loved by everyone. Why should I have to hold it?

Akira : Why are you being so difficult? This child was born to be loved. It's not like it had a choice, right? [25]

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The second scene that portrays Ren’s envy towards Akito is when Ren threw a tantrum in front of her husband, as well as every member and servant of the Sohma family. Her jealousy is caused by her fear that she wouldn’t receive the same love, affection, that attention that she used to receive now that Akito is born. It is shown by the quote below :

“Wake up, everyone... stop treating this child as something special, okay!? This child is just a human being, there’s no power! (Look at me...) That one woman should be loved by one man. That’s enough. (Look at me...) That’s enough! (I’m here... Notice me, I’m here)” [25]

The envy that Ren harbors against Akito as a woman is also portrayed when Akito has grown into an adult and began forming romantic and sexual relationships with men around her. Acting on her envious sentiment, Ren sabotaged Akito’s relationship with Shigure by telling him that she was having a sexual relationship with Kureno Sohma. Ren is also shown to use that circumstance to persuade Shigure into copulating with her as an act of revenge against Akito. Ren did another tantrum when she discovered that the reason Shigure was willing to copulate with her was that her appearance resembles Akito’s. It is shown in the dialogue below :

Ren : The pitiable person is you. Because of that stupid, old-fashioned “bond”, you are always being messed around with by Akito when in truth, you really don’t love her at all. You’re obsessed with an illusion, I can tell. Haven’t you noticed it? Your eyes, watching me, they’re the same as back then. Those eyes, wanting me.

Shigure : I’ve noticed it. Whenever I see you, tenderness wells up. If Akito were raised as a woman, she’d probably look just like you. I can imagine it.

(...)

Ren : Shigure, you... you’re wrong! You’re all wrong. Because of who... Because of who is Akito even existing in this world? Because of who Akira was saved!? Because of me... Because I was with him! [25]

The dialogue above shows Ren’s desire for attention from everyone around her. She has a high level of sense of entitlement because she was the one who gave birth to Akito, the family head who is possessed by the God of Chinese zodiacs. Her sense of entitlement is shown to be the reason behind the envy Ren felt whenever someone pays more attention to Akito than her.

Ren’s sense of entitlement towards attention is one of the essential characteristics of a parent who has narcissistic traits. Parents who use narcissistic parenting tend to only focus on fulfilling their own emotional needs, so they often

fail to fulfill their child’s emotional needs. [15] Ren’s desire to be the center of attention is one of her own emotional needs that she prioritizes above Akito’s emotional need to be loved and taken care of by people around her.

Through this perspective, Ren’s decision to raise Akito as a man based on her envy over the attention her husband gave to Akito, Ren’s reluctance to take care of Akito as her mother, as well as Ren’s displeasure when someone prioritizes Akito above her can be understood as conditions that occur due to her narcissistic traits.

The envious sentiment character Ren has toward Akito is also portrayed through scenes where Ren verbally abused Akito. The abuse Akito has been receiving throughout her life contributed to the sense of self-depreciation that she struggled with. One example of the abuse can be seen in chapter 89, where Ren tried to convey to Akito that the bond she shared with the other twelve Sohma family members isn’t real. The scene can be found in the dialogue below :

Ren : How many times must I say before you will understand? Depending on this kind of connection for love... it’s not real. The ‘eternity’ you treasured so much is just an illusion. This ‘eternity’ only happens in dreams! The Juunishi (Chinese zodiacs) who are forced to obey you are pitiful.

Akito : (Choking Ren against the wall) Tell me... then tell me what exactly is real! Is it parental love? That stuff isn’t real! In the Sohma family there are a bunch of parents who abandon their children! You are the same! That’s why! What is real, fake, illusion, worship worthy? Nobody, even you, have no right to define that! And the bond between the Juunishi and me... is for eternity. Nobody has the right to decide!

Ren : It’s true! It’s true... it exists. Only my and Akira’s bond is real!

Akito : I’ll kill you... I’m going to kill you! Ren : Then kill me! If I die, my soul will go to heaven, to where Akira is! I don’t need you!

Akito : (Crying) Why do that woman always say such offending words...? [26]

Ren’s narcissism is portrayed through the way she tried to discredit Akito by using herself as a standard. Narcissistic parents often feel either envious or jealous when their children form a connection with people outside the family or show their independence as a person. Relationships and independence that the child has threatened the confidence of a narcissistic parent. In the quote above, Ren insulted Akito by comparing the bond Akito has with the family members with the bond she had with Akira as an outlet for her threatened confidence. [27]

The second character to analyze in this research is Akito Sohma, the daughter of Ren Sohma and Akira Sohma,

the previous head of the Sohma family. Akito is depicted as a family head with a problematic personality. It is portrayed in the dialogue below :

Hatori : (Narration) After that, for almost two months, my life... was like a happy dream. It was as if seven years of good luck were condensed together. That girl laughed and smiled. Even now... that smiling face pierces my heart. The end of the dream was when we asked Akito to permit us to marry. That day... became...

Akito : (After blinding Hatori's eyes) What's with you! How could I give Hatori to you! What sort of trick do you think you're trying to pull! You can't even get rid of the curse! You aren't needed! You aren't needed! If Hatori's eye becomes blind, it's all your fault!

Hatori : (Narration) No matter what we said, no matter what we did, she kept on crying and began to crumble. Yet Akito is not to blame... her heart was sick.

Akito : At times like this, isn't it your duty to use your suppression technique? You should erase her memory. Any other guy wouldn't be able to do that. Right now, she's sad because of her memories of you, of your love together. Isn't it your duty to save her from that sadness? In reality, she wants to be released from those memories. She wants to forget...to forget you. [28]

In the dialogue above, Akito is portrayed as a character who tends to sabotage the family member's relationships through physical and emotional abuse. The scene above is not the only time Akito tried to sabotage the relationships that the possessed male family members have. It has occurred a few times, which can also be found in this dialogue below :

Akito : Is it true? That you and Hatsuharu are seeing each other? (...) That's why women are so disgusting. Being so cunning, that black and slithery long hair too makes me sick. Who was first to tempt the other? Hatsuharu? You? Which one has incurred my displeasure? When I get angry, I lose track of what's around me. It's a shame about Hatori's left eye

Izusu : Me... it's me. It's obvious I was the one to seduce him!

Akito : Women really are disgusting after all. You... have a lot of nerve. Why do you try to steal my "things"? Do you think you've won against me? Or what is it? ...Are you listening? Ah I see. You... you're really pathetic, you know? You...you're no good are you? Completely useless. Even with Hatsuharu, you're no good, Your darkness will devour Hatsuharu. You should realize how little you're worth. That

you're just there you make up numbers. Figure it out already. You aren't wanted! (*Akito pushed her form the window*) [29]

The dialogue above depicted how Akito tried to break the relationship between Isuzu and Hatsumaru, Sohma family members who are possessed by the animals of the Chinese zodiac because the bond the family members share with other people threatens Akito's confidence over the bond that she has with the family members.

From the quote depicting Akito's interaction with the character Isuzu mentioned above, it can be understood that Akito's personality is problematic. First, Akito has a manipulative tendency which is shown through how she manipulated Hatori into thinking that it is his fault that she blinded his eye. She also blamed Hatori that his partner is suffering because he was in so much pain with his blinded eyes. Using Hatori's sense of guilt, Akito then suggested Hatori ease his partner's emotional pain by erasing all her memories of him. She is also portrayed as having a violent personality, seeing no problem with blinding or pushing someone from the window to instill fear in the mind of the Sohma family members. Akito is also depicted as a possessive character. Her possessiveness is shown through how she sabotages relationships the family members have with other people, in fear that her family will leave her and she will no longer be the center of attention of the family. [30] From the portrayal of Akito's personality in the comic, it can be understood that Akito adopted narcissistic traits as well as the emotional instability that Ren has.

Akito's aggressiveness, as well as abusive and manipulative behavior, can be understood as the result of Ren's narcissistic, negative, and abusive parenting that failed to fulfill Akito's fundamental emotional needs. It results in Akito's sense of loneliness and fear of abandonment since her mother abandoned and emotionally neglected her. It is shown by a flashback in chapter 118, where Akito pleaded with Kureno to not leave her alone and abandon her. [30] Due to the abuse she went through, Akito has low self-esteem and she extremely depends on the validation that she got from being the God of the Sohma family. The dependence she has on the Sohma family to give her a sense of validation manifest itself as possessive and controlling behavior she has towards the family, with the hope that the family will never leave and abandon her under her control.

Akito shows improvement when she received sympathy and support from the main character, Tohru Honda. The improvement also brings realization of how abusive, controlling, and manipulative she had been towards her family. This realization motivated her to change her behavior, as shown in chapter 127 through this dialogue between Akito and Kyo Sohma.

Akito : You can live how you want.

Kyo : Huh...? That... what kind of... so...

Akito : How many times do I have to repeat myself!? [31]

In the dialogue above, it is depicted how Akito told Kyo, a child of the Sohma family, to live the way he wants. During this period, Akito has learned to let the Sohma family members live outside the fear and control she imposed on them and rejected the narcissistic values that Ren, her mother, taught her.

Another scene that displays Akito's improvement is when she decided to destroy The Cat's Room in the Sohma family estate. It is shown by the character Kazuma Sohma's quote written below :

Kazuma : She promised to tear down that room. It may be harder to correct the injustices of a family than it is to tear down a building. However, you've taken a step of progress. Remarkable, right? [31]

The quote above shows Akito's change in personality. Akito is shown to make effort in correcting her previously abusive and authoritarian ways and becoming a more accommodating and wise family head. The Cat's Room is a room in the Sohma family estate used to imprison family members who are possessed by the cat's spirit as a punishment for its attempt to betray God as well as its lack of trust in the plan God has crafted. Akito's plan to destroy The Cat's Room symbolizes that Akito wanted to break the generational cycle of abuse running in the Sohma family and create a new beginning.

In chapter 136, which is the last chapter of the comic series, Akito is portrayed as a much happier character who smiles more often. She is also shown to have made peace with her femaleness as well as her identity as a woman, instead of the identity as a man that her mother forced on her. It is portrayed by how Akito wore a dress and grew her hair in that chapter. [32]

In Fruits Basket's sequel, a comic series titled Fruits Basket Another, it is shown that Akito has married Shigure and has a child named Shiki Sohma. From the scenes in the comic, it is portrayed that Akito has a different parenting style compared to Ren. She is depicted as a loving, caring mother who ensures that Shiki grows up in freedom, unlike Ren who uses narcissistic and abusive means to keep Akito under her control. She also displayed emotional transparency and vulnerability to Shiki by admitting the faults she has committed as a family head and choosing to distance herself from the family. When Ren and her servants attempted to attack Shiki, she chose to protect him even though she suffered wounds due to the attack. [33] Akito's personality as a mother is shown through Shiki's monologue below :

Shiki : For a long time... she was the source of pain and suffering for their parents and families. She did a lot of things she can't undo and a lot of things she can't take back. She took so many things... she can't give back. But they all still care about me. They worry about me. They tell me it's not my

problem. They say I'm not my mother. And my mother thinks it's only right that she should pay for what she did, so she doesn't ask anyone to forgive her. Even if she gets hurt, she says she deserves it. She tells me not to let it bother me. But... still, to me... she's my mother. I love her. I've always, always loved her so much. She's my kind, loving mother. Take hand games, for instance. My mother said she thought she knew them at one time, but in reality, she didn't know any of them. Bedtime stories were the same. So she learned them along with me, all over again, one at a time. We learned games and read stories together. We'd eat things, see things, and make things together. They were such simple, everyday things. She told me thank you. She said that after meeting me, she learned so many things for the first time. She smiled happily as she said it. That's the mother I love. I really love her. She's always meant a lot to me. [34]

Akito's loving and caring personality as a mother is also shown through Shiki's memories. Akito didn't have experience with children's games or being told stories before bed due to her abusive and unaffectionate upbringing, but she was willing to learn both of them for her child. Akito is also shown to have enough emotional capacity to be honest about her past, as well as say thank you to her child. Shiki's memories of Akito prove that Akito has succeeded in breaking the cycle of abuse in her family.

### ***B. Narcissistic Parenting in the Story and Its Effects***

From the text above, it can be understood how narcissistic parenting is shown through Ren and Akito's relationship as mother and daughter. The narcissistic parenting style is proven to affect the child's personality, especially in adulthood. Ren's narcissism as a parent is shown through how she prioritizes herself more than Akito in a way that she considers her daughter as competition in terms of gaining affection and attention from people around them. Her desire to constantly be the center of attention and everyone's priority makes her unable to fulfill Akito's emotional needs as well as support Akito's growth and development. The emotional fulfillment of a narcissistic mother who needs to be the one who receives the most love, affection, and attention goes against the emotional fulfillment of a child who needs to be loved and paid attention to. It reflects one fundamental characteristic of the narcissistic parenting style, which is the reversed locus of emotional fulfillment. Within a narcissistic family, parents who are supposed to have a broader emotional capacity as an adult to fulfill their children's emotional needs, end up prioritizing their own needs and even putting demands on their children to fulfill their emotional needs. This left the child emotionally neglected. [15]

The desire of someone with narcissistic traits to constantly be the center of attention and everyone's priority stems from their view of the people around them. Someone with narcissistic traits tends to see people around them as tools or extensions of themselves to assist them in fulfilling

their needs. The lack of awareness that other people are also independent individuals often makes them think that only their needs need to be fulfilled and prioritized.

This is also associated with the tendency of someone with narcissistic traits to see things in black and white. Other people are judged not based on their individuality, but on whether they are useful to someone with narcissistic traits or not. Someone whom they find useful will be considered a good person, while someone whom they find useless or threatening to their sense of grandiosity will be considered a bad person. At last, everyone around someone with narcissistic traits is considered a tool to help them feel better about themselves.

[35]

In the text, it is shown that the mother depicted in the story is a mother who is envious of her daughter, and is shown to act on her envy by raising her daughter as a man so that she would not be a competition to her as a woman and sabotaging the relationships the daughter has with men around her. She is portrayed as a mother who wants to be the center of attention and the one everyone loves the most, both in a platonic and romantic way.

Her envy, accompanied by her desire to be the center of attention, are characteristics of people with narcissistic traits who tend to desire to constantly be the center of attention. [36] Parents who have narcissistic traits or use narcissistic parenting tend to seek more external validation and attention to themselves compared to their couple and children. One of the ways narcissistic parents use to seek external validation is by treating their children in a way that makes them think they are inferior compared to their parents. This makes children of narcissistic parents tend to have a lower level of self-esteem and a higher level of self-doubt.

[37]

Competition between narcissistic parent and their child to gain attention tends to be more detrimental if the parent is a mother and the child is a daughter. A narcissistic mother tends to consider her daughter as competition in terms of femalehood and gaining male attention. In a patriarchal society where male's validation and perspective are considered important to value a woman's worth, a woman's youth and sexuality are considered attractive qualities. One example of the glorification of woman's youth in patriarchal society can be seen through the popularity of anti-aging products marketed at women and males' tendency to be attracted to younger women. [38] For a narcissistic mother who is going through the aging process while her daughter is growing as a young woman, the daughter's attractiveness and sexuality are considered competition to a narcissistic mother in gaining attention from people around them. [37]

Narcissistic parenting can also be seen in how they interact with their children. As depicted in the story, a narcissistic mother tends to use extreme, negative, and insulting words toward their child to rob them of their confidence and self-esteem, which goes in line with case

studies compiled by Donaldson-Pressman and Pressman and published in 2009 regarding the behavior of the narcissistic parent. [15] As the result, children of narcissistic parent tend to have a higher possibility to adopt narcissistic traits as an adult. [39] As shown in the story analysis above, like Akito who experiences a significant desire to be the center of attention, there are survivors of narcissistic abuse who adopt the narcissistic traits of their parents.

Someone who has narcissistic traits has a higher tendency to defend and justify their deeds, even though what they do is ethically or morally wrong to protect themselves from perceived threats and harm against themselves. They tend to defend themselves by explosive rage and unregulated expressions of emotions. [17] As shown in the comic analyzed in this research, a survivor of narcissistic abuse that adopted narcissistic traits has a higher tendency to defend themselves and shift the blame to other parties. Blame shifting is often found in those who struggle with narcissistic traits. [40]

People who have narcissistic traits have a higher tendency to aggressivity and abusive behavior because they have poor and fragile self-esteem.[41] It is because, in their childhood, they might experience unhealthy, dysfunctional, and narcissistic family dynamics which fail to give them a solid sense of identity and self-esteem. These dysfunctional dynamics, fragile sense of self and narcissistic traits might be brought into their adulthood as they grow up.[42] To protect their fragile self-esteem, as well as prove themselves, they tend to craft a perfect self-image that gives them a sense of superiority compared to the people around them.

In Fruits Basket story, the child adapts narcissistic traits as a defense mechanism against her abusive childhood. Because her mother failed to nurture her, fulfill her emotional needs as a child, and even considered her as a competition, the child experienced low self-esteem and a sense of being unlovable. Aside from that, the child also develops abandonment issues as a result of the emotional neglect she went through as a child. Those factors contribute to her adapting her mother's narcissistic traits to protect herself from experiencing the same childhood pain she went through. This goes along with the concept of narcissistic legacy, which explains that the narcissistic traits of a parent pass from one generation to the next generation.

The narcissistic legacy passed to a child can be broken once the child builds enough mental strength to reject the narcissistic values their parents taught them through negative narcissistic parenting. To break the narcissistic legacy, after becoming a mother, the character in this story rejected the values that her mother taught her by releasing the control she has over her family and learning to be a good mother to her son.

### *C. Narcissistic Parenting in Reality of Contemporary Japan*

Japan is infamous for being a country dominated by authoritative parenting style but even so, the curiosity

## “An Unloving Parenthood: Understanding Narcissistic Parenting through Japanese Pop Culture”

Japanese society has towards narcissistic parenting is shown to begin in 2008, followed by a significant increase in 2016 and 2020, and a stable increase up to 2022. The surge of Japanese people’s curiosity about narcissistic parenting can be seen through graphics below that show Google search trends of phrases like ‘自己愛性親 (*Jiko aisei oya*; narcissistic parent)’, ‘自己愛親 (*Jikoai oya*; parents narcissism)’. ‘自己愛性人格障害親 (*Jiko aisei jinkaku shougai oya*; Parents narcissistic personality)’, dan ‘自己愛性パーソナリティ障害親 (*Jiko aisei paasonariti shougai oya*; parents narcissistic personality disorder).

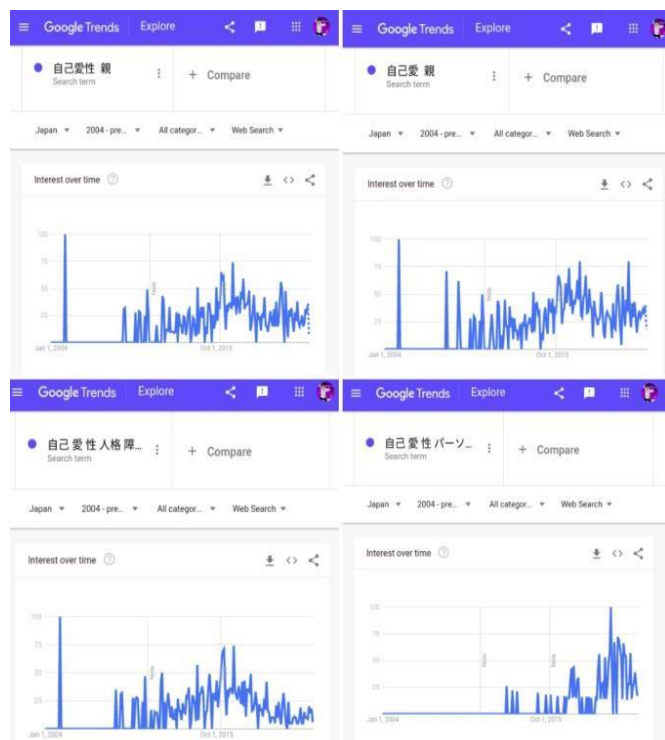


Illustration 1: Google search trends for phrase (from top left to bottom right) ‘自己愛性親 (*Jiko aisei oya*; narcissistic parent)’, ‘自己愛親 (*Jikoai oya*; parents narcissism)’, ‘自己愛性人格障害親 (*Jiko aisei jinkaku shougai oya*; parents narcissistic personality disorder)’, and ‘自己愛性パーソナリティ障害親 (*Jiko aisei paasonariti shougai oya*; parents narcissistic personality disorder)’ from 2004 to 2022.

Source (from top left to bottom right) :

<https://trends.google.com/trends/explore?date=all&geo=JP&q=%E8%87%AA%E5%B7%B1%E6%84%9B%E6%80%A7%20%E8%A6%AA>,  
<https://trends.google.com/trends/explore?date=all&geo=JP&q=%E8%87%AA%E5%B7%B1%E6%84%9B%20%E6%80%A7%20%E8%A6%AA>,  
<https://trends.google.com/trends/explore?q=%E8%87%AA%E5%B7%B1%20%E6%84%9B%20%E6%80%A7%20%E4%BA%BA%E6%A0%BC%20%E9%9A%9C%E5%AE%B3%20%E8%A6%AA&date=all&geo=JP>,  
<https://trends.google.com/trends/explore?q=%E8%87%AA%E5%B7%B1%20%E6%84%9B%20%E6%80%A7%20%E4%BA%BA%E6%A0%BC%20%E9%9A%9C%E5%AE%B3%20%E8%A6%AA&date=all&geo=JP>

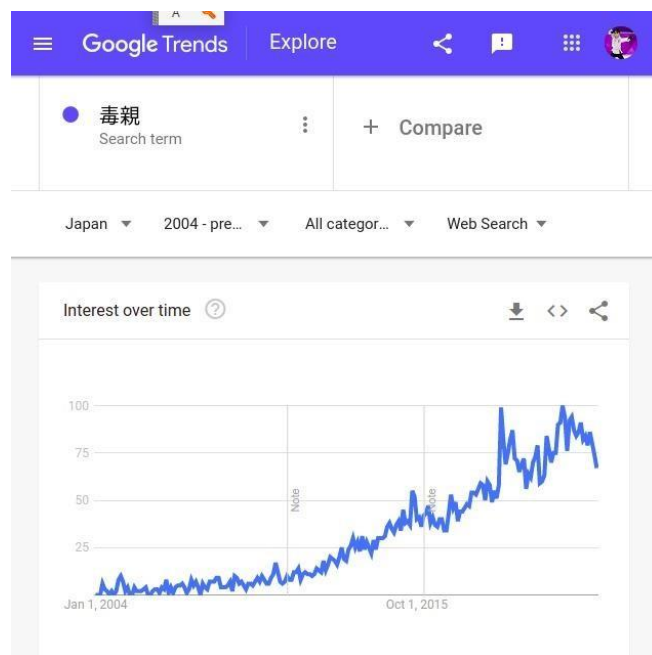


Illustration 2: Google search trends of ‘毒親 (*Dokuoya*; toxic parents)’ from 2004 to 2022.

Source: <https://trends.google.com/trends/explore?date=all&geo=JP&q=%E6%8AF%92%E8%A6%AA>

Aside from keywords and phrases mentioned above, google search trends for phrase 毒親 (*dokuoya*; toxic parents) also went through a significant increase in 2019. The characteristics of *dokuoya* or toxic parents can be considered close to narcissistic parents, which are: 1) Prioritizing themselves over their children’s well-being, 2) Emotionally unstable and prone to explosive rage, 3) Being too open towards their child and prone to cross child’s boundary and discuss inappropriate themes and topics with their child, 4) Controlling, and 5) Overtly critical without showing appreciation to their child. [43]

From the google search trend in Japan shown above, it can be understood that the awareness of narcissistic or toxic parenting, as well as the relevance of narcissism to parenting style is already present to some extent in Japan. Since 1990, narcissism and its relevance to the parent-child dynamic have been among many topics researched in Japan’s academic environment. According to research done by Kazuhiro Miyashita in the article ‘青年におけるナルシズム(自己愛)的傾向と親の養育態度・家庭の雰囲気の関係 (*Seinen ni okeru narushishizumu (Jikoai) teki keiou to oya no yoiuku taido · katei no fun'iki no kankei*; Connection between narcissistic tendency in young adults and parents’ behavior/family situation)’ found in Japanese Journal of Educational Psychology Volume 39 (1991) which invited participation of 270 college students in Japan, narcissistic traits like emotional rejection from a mother and domineering attitude of a father contribute to the narcissistic tendency among young adults in Japan. [44]

In a research done by Osamu Fukushima, et al (2006) titled ‘親の自己愛と子への攻撃: 自己の不遇を子に帰すとき (*Oya no jikoai to ko he no kougeki: Jiko no fuguu*



*wo ko ni kaesu toki*; Parental narcissism and aggression towards children: when parents blame children for their suffering) found in 社会心理学研究 (*Shakai shinrigaku kenkyuu*; Social Psychology Research) Vol. 22 No. 1 which invited participation of 626 parents in Japan, it is found that narcissistic parents have higher tendency to attack and blame their children when they are trapped in a situation that makes them feel incapable or powerless.[45]

There are a few things that can be understood from the researchs mentioned above. First, narcissistic parenting isn't only a 'western' problem but can be considered a worldwide problem, including in Japan which is notorious for its gentle parenting. Second, research about parental narcissism in Japan shows that narcissistic parents have a higher tendency to attack and blame their children for what they experience, as well as not having enough emotional capacity to raise their children, which causes their children to grow up with trauma or adapt their parents' narcissistic traits. These findings go in line with Akito Sohma's experience which is portrayed in *Fruits Basket* where she is raised by a narcissistic mother who doesn't have the emotional capacity to raise her, and often criticizes and blames Akito for what she experiences. This horrible childhood caused Akito to grow into an adult who adapts narcissistic traits as her defense mechanism.

#### IV. CONCLUSIONS

Narcissistic parenting is considered a global problem, and Japan is no exception. This parenting problem is often brought up in popular culture which is consumed by the mass. One example of a popular culture product that brings up this topic is the comic *Fruits Basket* by Natsuki Takaya, which portrays narcissistic parenting through the relationship between mother and daughter, Ren Sohma and Akito Sohma, in the story.

From the analysis done on the relationship between the characters in *Fruits Basket*, it can be concluded that aggressivity, critical and offensive attitude, as well as manipulative behavior directed toward children, are signs of narcissistic parenting. Attention-seeking behavior, excessive self-righteousness, and jealousy are notable signs as well. The effects of narcissistic parenting in children are also found in the child's personality and behavioral problems after she grew up into an adult, which is unstable emotions, lack of self-esteem, fragile sense of self, as well as adapted notable narcissistic traits such as attention-seeking tendencies, self-grandiosity, justifying themselves, and blame-shifting or avoiding responsibility.

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