

The metaphors for capitalism and hustle culture in *Spirited Away*

SARA KABIR

Hidden in the fantastic, escapist narrative of Hayao Miyazaki's Oscar-winning movie Spirited Away, is an allegory about the horrors of capitalism and society's toxic obsession with work. Even two decades after the movie's release, it is still eerily relevant to our contemporary hustle work culture.

Spirited Away follows the adventures of young Chihiro, who is forced to work at a mysterious bathhouse for spirits for the safe return of her parents, who have been transformed into pigs by the bathhouse's villainous ruler, Yubaba.

When Chihiro goes to Yubaba in search of a job, in an attempt to save her parents, she is told, "I'll give you the most difficult job I've got, and work you until you breathe your very last breath." She has to prove her worth by working.

Her survival literally depends on how well she can work, as she is told early on, "If you don't get a job, Yubaba will turn you into an animal."

Despite the eccentric spirits, bright colours, nostalgic music, and bustling environment of the bathhouse, it is a place of work at its core. It runs on its fixed schedule; employees sleep in crowded rooms and are pitted against one another to see who can work the hardest, and the person who works the hardest is rewarded.

There is a clear hierarchy in the workplace and those who are at the bottom have to work to prove their worth. The bathhouse feeds off of the exhaustion and overworking of its employees. Sound

familiar? It's because we live in almost an alternate version of this world today, minus the flying dragons and masked spirits, of course.

Greed and capitalism are pretty clearly some of the prominent themes of the movie. In the film, we see how greed can literally transform a person. Chihiro's parents are turned into pigs – symbolism for capitalists – as they fail to stop devouring the food.

Moreover, Yubaba is the epitome of what greed can do to a person. She is so obsessed with money and riches that she fails to realise her baby is missing at one point in the story. The child she supposedly loves and cares for the most pales in comparison to riches and success.

Spirited Away also shows just how seductive hustle culture can be. The lure of gold encourages a competitive environment among the bathhouse workers, as they pour over each other in an attempt to please a customer called No Face, who rewards them by showering them in gold coins. As tempting as the money seems, this is a trap. No Face ends up literally swallowing some of the workers whole, symbolising how easily we can lose ourselves in work and be consumed by a

false fantasy.

Work is Chihiro's way to escape from the bathhouse and save her parents. It's her salvation. But it is also a double-edged sword. She finds herself getting pulled more and more into the hustle culture at the bathhouse as she struggles to complete tasks in time. Though she remains clear-headed throughout most of the movie and does not fall into the trap of money and greed unlike many of her colleagues, it is only when Chihiro is able to let go of her job and find an alternative, spiritual fulfilment that she is able to leave.

That is not to say the hustle culture doesn't tempt her.

At one point in the movie, we see her almost forget her real name, a metaphor for losing her sense of self, her identity, as she delves deeper into the work culture. Ultimately, Chihiro stays incorruptible to capitalist greed, not because of her lack of greed, but rather because she has a greater purpose. She is too focused on saving her parents and getting back to her old life for the lure of riches to tempt her into staying.

Unlike Chihiro, her roommate Lin, is unable to escape. She can only lament

over her unfulfilled future plans and dreams – "I've got to get out of here. Someday I'm getting on that train." For Lin, freedom and a life outside of work will always remain a dream, a wish that keeps her going. Most people don't get to magically leave their 9 to 5 jobs and live a life of luxury; most spend their entire lives dreaming of that "someday", until "someday" turns into "never".

From the outside, the world of *Spirited Away* looks beautiful. However, Chihiro is not fooled. She sees it for what it is even when her parents fail to do so. Despite all that, the story gives us hope. With the act of Chihiro finally breaking the curse put on her parents and retaining her sense of self by regaining her real name from Yubaba, Studio Ghibli attempts to give viewers a glimpse into what hope could look like.

Maybe we too can someday hold on to our identity, listen to our inner child, and get out of the rat race that is work.

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PHOTO: ORCHID CHAKMA

Exploring friendship as an adult

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It's hard to find a partner at this age. It's harder to make friends.

Now, in my late twenties, I can honestly say that I have been lucky enough to find a few very good and one great friend. And I met this one great friend fairly later in life, only a couple of years ago. In retrospect, however, I think it is probably one of the reasons why we bonded so powerfully — not to be misunderstood with "easily", because, as we all might be aware, making friends at this age is not a cakewalk.

What we bonded over, however, was exactly that — the increasing struggles of connecting with other people as we grew up.

"Making new friends when we were young seemed like a natural process, when we clicked with our peers or classmates or neighbours, and somewhat mysteriously, friendships developed," says Sakib Ahmed, who works as an environmentalist. And in adulthood, it is more difficult.

It seems almost impossible for us, as full-time working adults, to carve out the time to see through the plans we make with our friends over a chance conversation. *The New York Times* recently re-ran their 2012 article "Why Is It Hard to Make Friends Over 30?" because the topic is so ageless. In it, they cited a peer group study that "observed that people tended to interact with fewer people as they moved toward midlife, but that they grew closer to the friends they already had." It makes sense for the most part. But not everyone would agree that they've tended

to remain friends — never mind getting closer — with their school-college-university friends.

An individual who works at an ad agency, and wishes to remain anonymous, says she can't relate to her school-girl-friends anymore. "All my friends are married now and some even have children," she states.

"Most of their conversations tend to revolve around their family: what the children eat, what makes happy or annoys them; their partners' quirks and habits; and how hard it is to maintain a household. And it is fine, of course, to talk about that. It's just that as a single woman in my late 20s, still living with my parents, with no plans on getting married anytime soon, I sometimes don't know how to contribute to that conversation beyond a superficial level. I just can't connect with them at times," she adds.

In that regard, we can assume that relatability is an important ingredient in the recipe for remaining friends. But what about meeting new people? As some people rightly point out, it isn't like there's a Tinder for making friends.

Shovy Zibran, who grew up in three different countries, says, "Making new friends is definitely a lot easier task then holding on to the old ones for someone like me. I've managed to remain in touch with 10 people in my life who I've known since I was 10 years old myself. I don't think they will ever be out of my life but at the same time, I don't think I'll ever stop looking for new souls and to find out their stories, their emotions, their strongest love and strongest hate. Especially the way I move countries, I need to know how

to share my time with people."

Yet, in a conservative culture like ours, we cannot meet people as organically as people perhaps do abroad, mainly because of safety concerns. Moreover, we have other responsibilities that sometimes take precedence; investing time and effort into making new friends seems pointless, especially when we consider that it may not work out in the end and might hamper our daily routine. At times, it's just hard work to have to consistently put in the same amount of effort throughout the initial stages of forming that friendship.

As Shovy articulates further about meeting new people, "Making friends as an adult is tough because of the added baggage. You're already carrying your own emotional baggage and that of the friends you already have and adding new baggage to it seems like an unnecessary task for most of us. People in general tend to start closing up emotionally as they grow up and their personal goals and dreams start to take priority more than anything else. Making new friends in the middle of it all seems tedious".

Sakib offers up a solution to this, however, saying, "I think in adult friendships, we should lower our expectations, and foster the ability to understand and forgive much more. We shouldn't expect our friends to be perfect human beings. For example, we shouldn't take cancellations of a hangout, or late replies to texts personally, or as an indication that our friends have grown tired of us and don't want us around anymore."

He adds, "It is important to understand their commitments, and extend compassion and patience during difficult times,

rather than be upset or irrational. We should realise that we all have to deal with our issues."

This, I feel, is an important issue that has been touched upon. Often, in our tendency to manifest easy friendships like we had in our childhood, we tend to forget that we are adults now — with adult responsibilities, obligations, and problems. We expect our friends to always be there for us, regardless of whether we are able to do the same, neglecting that there are now other, personal factors to take into account.

And on the other hand, if we feel our efforts aren't acknowledged enough (read: the way we want them acknowledged), we start to get a chip on our shoulders.

Understandably, it is not as easy to maintain friendships, and it shouldn't be either. There is a world of things we need to pay attention to, especially now when we've finally, fully stepped into "adulthood".

Like other relationships, nurturing a good, healthy friendship takes work. We have to be more understanding towards each other; care about our friends, have empathy for their situations and circumstances. Besides, we can prioritise who we devote our time and effort to. We put our foot in, test the waters and see if we like how the temperature feels, whether we're meeting new people or checking in with an old friendship over time.

In the end, "Once you figure out who's staying forever you automatically start allocating time for them whether it be once every six months or once every two weeks," says the anonymous wise lady.