

Forging a Family: Subverting the Heteronormative Family Structure and Navigating Identities in the Anime Spy X Family

¹ Sreya Mukherjee Ph.D. Scholar (UGC Senior Research Fellow), Department of Indian and World Literatures, The English and Foreign Languages University, Hyderabad.*

Email: sreyaphdiw121@efluniversity.ac.in

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Abstract

Anime, with its global popularity and mass engagement, is a cultural form that is positioned at a strategically significant juncture where the demarcation between high culture and popular culture gets blurred. The medium and form of anime that include stunning visual storytelling styles not only attract the audience towards it but also allow the medium to explore serious and mature themes like death, grief, etc., in a nuanced manner. The anime series Spy X Family, which was released in April 2022 and is based on an eponymous manga by Tatsuya Endo, leverages the intricacies of the anime form to portray serious issues like war, poverty and corruption in a way that is simultaneously sensitive and light-hearted. The premise of the anime series centres on an international spy code-named Twilight who is assigned a mission to gather intelligence about a hostile country that might initiate a nuclear war in the future. The secret mission requires Twilight to forge a faux family so that he can easily blend into society. He manages to assemble an eccentric faux family that involves an assassin and an orphaned telepath as his wife and daughter, respectively. The family that Twilight forges for the mission is ironically called the Forger family, however, the family name is not merely a silly word play, it is more than just a pun. It subverts the heteronormative family structure that is based on blood kinship and creates space for alternative family dynamics. This paper analyses Spy X Family by focussing on the series' portrayal of counter-normative family structures, interpersonal dynamics, the negotiation of multiple identities and how it dismantles the socio-cultural constructedness of heteronormative family configurations.

Keywords: Anime, family dynamics, Spy X Family, heteronormativity, identity.

1. Introduction: The Soft Power of Anime

“Families are strange. Two people can be a family. You can be separated and still be a family. You can be not related by blood and still be a family.”

(Papa No Iukoto Wo Kikinasai! 2012)

Anime refers to the animated content such as, movies and series, that are produced in Japan. Anime, as a specific form of media, occupies a strategic position in the global spectrum of popular culture. Anime, like most other components of popular culture, was once regarded as belonging to the problematic category of low culture. However, with the international acknowledgement and global successes that anime has received in the last few decades, have aided it in climbing the rungs of prestige within the paradigm of culture. Consequently, anime has also been appropriated by the self-proclaimed guardians of high culture and academia alike. Several elitist clubs hold exclusive screening of anime, while universities around the globe started offering structured courses on anime, with reams of academic papers and books being written on the subject. Despite its appropriation or assimilation within the discourse of high culture, anime continues to remain and continues to strengthen its foothold within the realm of popular culture.

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In fact, anime is one of those rare sites where the demarcation between high culture, low culture and popular culture gets blurred. For instance, Hayao Miyazaki, the Japanese animator and film-maker, who is best known for being the co-founder of Studio Ghibli, has been the recipient of innumerable prestigious awards. He has won Academy Award for Best Animated Feature Film (2003, 2024), Academy Honorary Award (2014), and BAFTA Award for Best Animated Film (2024), to name just a few. Several journals dedicate special issues on the films and works of Miyazaki. Despite all the international fame and scholarly attention accorded to him, Miyazaki's works are very much rooted in the domain of popular culture. There are several anime fan festivals organised across the world, where fans not only engage in discussions but also dress up as anime characters of their choice. Hence, anime is located at the rare juncture where popular culture intersects with high culture, thereby adding to its allure and appeal.

Japan is not only acutely aware of anime's potential but also knows how to wield it across socio-cultural and economic domains. Anime is one of the most important and influential aspect of Japan's soft power policy. The concept of soft power was propounded by the U.S political science scholar Josheph Nye. According to Nye, soft power "is the ability to get what you want through attraction rather than coercion or payments. It arises from the attractiveness of a country's culture, political ideals, and policies" (5). A country uses its soft power to make it seem desirable in the eyes of others. Anime has played a huge role in changing the global perception about Japan, especially in context of the country's involvement in the gruesome war crimes perpetuated during 19th and 20th century.

Leveraging anime's global popularity, Japan has strategically used anime industry as a cultural product that establishes Japan as a cool, trendy and happening place, similar to the aesthetically pleasing visuals depicted in anime. As a result, Japan in the recent years, has witnessed not only an exponential growth in its tourist footfall but also a rise in the number of international students who see Japan as an attractive destination to pursue higher education. According to Sharalyn Orbaugh, "Manga and anime's popularity in East and Southeast Asia has brought large numbers of international students into Japanese universities just as decreasing domestic birthrates were threatening the survival of many institutions" (112). The immense popularity of anime has also resulted in huge monetary collections garnered by the worldwide release of anime movies and series. It has further contributed to the growing economy of Japan. Orbaugh writes, "Feature-length anime by well-known directors are commonly released worldwide, with Miyazaki Hayao's *Howl's Moving Castle* (2004), for example, grossing 27.5 billion yen (US\$ 24 million) in 36 countries... In 2005, the global market for anime reached 233.9 billion yen (US\$ 2.1 billion)" (112).

Contextualising the Interface between Anime and Family Dynamics

The art and medium of anime, with the characters usually drawn in a cartoonish manner, more often than not infantilise the cultural form. The medium and form of anime has led to the common perception that it deals only with non-serious or childish themes, and it has therefore been one of the primary reasons behind relegating anime to sphere of low culture. However, nothing can be further from truth because anime not only engages with serious and mature themes such as death, grief, war, etc., but its form has also gradually evolved to reflect the depth of its themes. For instance, *Grave of the Fireflies* (1988) explore the horrors of war and its impact on human lives. *Princess Mononoke* (1997) showcases through visually stunning narratives the perpetual tension between nature and civilisation. In fact, the intricate

and mesmerising visuals of anime attracts the audience and make them so strongly engaged with the content. That is why, all over the globe the emergence of anime fandoms is on the ascendance. These are tight-knitted groups of anime audience who share common interests, and bond strongly over their shared feelings for any anime show and/or its characters.

Family bonds, values and their unique dynamics feature prominently in a wide range of anime movies and series. In the anime series Kill la Kill (2013), the importance of rootedness and family values is explored in a nuanced manner. The Mankanshoku family is portrayed as an eccentric family, where the father is an illegal doctor engaging in shady businesses and the mother is obsessed with making croquettes, which no one ever eats. The Mankanshoku family which comprises of a middle-aged couple and their two teenage children are always embroiled in ludicrous circumstances. Moreover, they live in the poorest suburbs located in the slums of Honno city. Despite their straitened situations and outlandish behaviour, the family takes pride in their identity and cherish the love that they share. While others make fun of the family, Mako Mankanshoku, the daughter of the family, never fails to assert the pride that she takes in being a part of the Mankanshoku family. Likewise, the 2018 anime movie Mirai portrays the special bond that siblings share with each other. It also comments on the hyper busy life that people lead especially in metropolitan cities, where their professional commitments leave no time for family. Other hugely popular movies like Wolf Children (2012) and When Marnie Was There (2014), beautifully explore the themes of maternal love and the relationship between mother and her children. The anime series Spy X Family also engages with the themes of family bonds and dynamics, but it also dismantles the normative discourse on how an ideal family should look like.

Spy X Family: Forging the Forger Family

The anime Spy X Family, adapted from the eponymous manga by Tatsuya Endo, had taken the anime world by a tempestuous storm within a week of its premiering in April 2022. Its release had endangered a scoring war, with Spy X Family acing all the popularity charts, coming second only to the incredibly popular series Fullmetal Alchemist: Brotherhood. According to the website TV Fandom Lounge, the first episode of Spy X Family racked up around 6.9 million views, thereby surpassing the viewership garnered by the premiering episodes of Kaguya-sama: Love is War (2019) and The Rising of the Shield Hero (2019). Spy X Family's immense success has firmly ensconced it on the list of canonical anime, on par with Demon Slayer (2019) and Death Note (2006).

Spy X Family's popularity is not confined to the niche world of anime viewership but has spilled onto social media platforms especially, Instagram and TikTok. These social media platforms whose consumer demographics are dominated by Millennials and Gen Z were inundated with memes and reels featuring the cute family that exudes the warm glow of affection, care and love. This family, which constitutes the core component of the anime and represents the 'Family' of the title, is always presented in the reels and memes as exchanging loving smiles and indulging in funny antics with one another. This family of three, comprising of dad, mom and their four-year-old daughter, is featured on the anime's poster and is indeed the hallmark of the series. However, the substantial popularity of the series cannot be solely attributed to the kawaii (cute) family and their affectionate domesticity. The series, in fact, embeds multiple layers of signification within its seemingly inane situational comedy and consequently, a largely diversified audience is able to form meaningful engagement with it.

The anime is set in a fictional region in the 1960s against the backdrop of a cold war between the two fictional countries of Ostania and Westalis, which is eerily suggestive of the Cold War era East and West Germany, respectively. Spy X Family presents a genre-blending venture as well as a complex and nuanced narrative arc, which is steeped in the cinematic aesthetics of the golden age spy films of the 1960s. However, the anime doesn't strictly follow the architectural conventions of the 1960s as the series features several objects, ranging from humble ketchup bottles to transportation technology that are unapologetically anachronistic. Rather than disrupting the visual experience, the intentional anachronism results in endowing the series with a unique splendour that feels like a creative fusion of a nostalgic heritage with the distinctively twenty-first-century conventions. Tatsuya Endo in volume 6 of the Spy X Family manga acknowledges the blending of past and present in the following words:

I draw this manga with the idea that it's set in the sixties or seventies, but it ends up as a mishmash of the present and past. This happens because I frequently have to ask myself if something existed during that time period, and if I can't find the answer, I just shrug it off and think, 'Well, this is a fictional country...' (2021)

The central premise of Spy X Family concerns an accomplished spy codenamed Twilight working for Westalis's intelligence agency WISE, who is entrusted with a mission, called Operation Strix, to infiltrate a high-profile politician's social circle in order to access his future political plans. The politician professes a militaristic foreign policy and supports a war between Ostania and Westalis. He therefore poses a serious menace to the fraught truce between the two countries and if he is not stopped his jingoistic politics threaten to escalate the ongoing cold war between Ostania and Westalis into full-fledged bloodshed. However, it is nearly impossible to enter his social circle because he is a very cautious man and rarely makes any public appearances. The only public event that he certainly attends is the exclusive social gatherings at his son's elite school, Eden Academy. Twilight's mission therefore entails finding himself a wife and child, and getting the child enrolled at the prestigious Eden Academy so that he could attend the school's exclusive social gatherings and get close to the politician, within a span of one week.

Twilight therefore sets out to build a faux family, which constitutes the most crucial step of Operation Strix. He takes the cover name of Loid Forger for the mission and goes to a squalid orphanage to adopt a child. His criteria for adoption is that the child should be at least six years of age and also possess basic literacy because the child has to clear the entrance exam of Eden Academy, which is scheduled within a week. He chances upon a four-year-old girl Anya, who happens to be a telepath. As she could read Loid's mind, she pretends to be of six years of age and correctly answers all the questions posed by Loid by gleaning the answers through her telepathic power.

After successfully acquiring a child, Loid focused on the next challenge of finding a wife. A pertinent question arises here, that if the main objective of Operation Strix is to infiltrate Eden Academy's private gatherings then adopting a child should have been enough. Why does WISE insist on Twilight finding himself a wife as well? The answer lies in the heteronormative conditioning of society that recognised a heterosexual married couple and their legitimate child as the only valid conception of family. Eden Academy, the prestigious school that prided itself on producing national leaders and other eminent personalities, also played its role in perpetuating the heteronormative socio-cultural conventions. The school's admission policy

entailed an interview of not only the prospective student but also his/her parents. Eden Academy's admission policy categorically stated that both the parents of the student must be present for the interview, and failure to comply would result in the automatic disqualification of the candidate.

However, finding a single, sophisticated and appealing woman, convincing her to marry Loid and become a part of the faux family and that too within the span of a week is a task that intimidated even Twilight, the world-class spy. By sheer fluke, he meets a woman who checks off all the criteria required for becoming Loid Forger's wife. She is Yor Briar, a twenty-seven-year-old woman who is employed at a clerical level job in a government establishment. She lacks social skills and has never had any romantic relationship in the twenty-seven years of her life, a fact that her co-workers leverage to bully her. She lives in a society where even the governmental agencies pry into the personal lives of the citizens. The government expects women of her age to be married, and single women are perceived as suspicious entities who pose a threat to the social fabric. Single women are often apprehended by government agencies on absurd charges, for instance, Yor's colleagues casually remark that she must be a "spy sent here to lower the country's birth rate," and therefore Yor's single status had become a cause of anxiety in her life. Moreover, she is an assassin, who had entered the dark world of contractual killing from a very young age, in order to financially support her younger brother. Therefore, to maintain her secret identity as an assassin and to subdue all the aspersions cast her way, she agrees to enter into a fake marriage with Loid Forger.

Loid Forger, thus, successfully forges the faux Forger family, which while seeming to be ordinary is, in fact, constituted of the most extraordinary members, with the father being a spy, the mother an assassin and the daughter a telepath. Through the faux Forger family, Tatsuya Endo subversively plays into the narrative that the disintegration of the family unit could result in the collapse of human civilisation. Correspondingly, in the universe of *Spy X Family*, world peace hinges on the efficient functioning of the Forger family as its failure would lead to an imminent war between Ostania and Westalis. Historically, the heteronormative family structure had been conceptualised as the fundamental unit of society. However, by expeditiously assembling a faux family, Loid undermines the hallowed status associated with the institution of heteronormative family and highlights its socio-cultural constructedness.

Subverting the Hegemony of Normative and Navigating Alternative Family Structures

The Forger family, by subverting the hegemony of institutionalised family structure, which is based on blood kinship, opens up the possibility of alternative forms of familial bond. It could be argued that Loid and Yor agreed to come together for their own selfish interest, but rather than limiting their relationship to be just a marriage of convenience, they take extra effort to come out of their comfort zones and despite their different motives forge a home together, where the relationships might be fake but the love they feel for one another is definitely real. What sets *Spy X Family* a cut above the rest is the fact that each member of the Forger family makes genuine efforts to build loving relationships with each other, while in most other anime families the relationship between family members is taken for granted. In most anime, the members of a family are expected to love and care for each other because they share blood kinship. *Spy X Family* refutes the discourse claiming that sharing blood kinship is enough to build meaningful relationships. Love and affection in any relationship can never be taken for granted, because these are the emotions that require concentrated efforts from all the

individuals involved in order to foster a genuinely loving family. Yor, who is portrayed as clumsy and clueless when it comes to domestic roles, puts in her best efforts to be the perfect wife and mother in the Forger family. She doesn't make the efforts for putting up the charade of a normal family or any other ulterior motives, but for the sheer love that she feels toward her family members. She develops genuine affection for Anya and becomes very protective of her, despite knowing that the Forger family might collapse with the completion of Operation Strix. Yor says, "I know that this family is just for appearances. But... I still feel like...I want to be a better mother to that girl" (Spy X Family 2023).

The allure of found families such as, the Forger family, could further be explicated within the framework of the personal philosophy propounded by one of the most controversial anime characters, Deishuu Kaiki, who features in the Monogatari series. Deishuu Kaiki is a morally ambiguous character who has a convoluted way of making sense of the world around him. He likes to engage in philosophical discussions just to flex, what he believes to be his, intellectual prowess. In one such debate, someone posited a question asking which of the two is inherently more valuable: a real object or its indistinguishable imitation. While most people thought that the real object ought to be more valuable at least in comparison to its duplicate, Deishuu Kaiki counterintuitively believed that the indistinguishable duplicate is more valuable than the real object. Kaiki rationalises that the real thing, which could imply anything ranging from artefacts, relationships, and feelings to talent, doesn't have to make any extra effort to establish its realness because it is already taken for granted. On the other hand, the imitation of the real thing has to put in concentrated effort to attain the semblance of realness, and therefore in its deliberate attempt to imitate the realness it accrues more value than the real thing.

All three members of the Forger family are social outcasts who find refuge in one another, moreover, the family also gives them the space to re-negotiate their identity. Twilight, the spy par excellence who has dedicated his life to the noble cause of world peace and can effortlessly accomplish any mission entrusted to him, is at the end of the day a lonely man devoid of any meaningful human connections. As a spy, he operates on the fringes of social relationships, introspecting at the very first episode of the first season of Spy X Family, "Marriage? Ordinary happiness? I already got rid of my attachment to such things the day I became a spy, along with my real identity" (2022). WISE assigned him the nearly impossible mission of forging a family within a week because he was the master of disguise and could pull off any social role effortlessly. It ought to have been easy for him, and therefore Twilight in his characteristically composed manner acknowledges at the beginning of Operation Strix, "A father is just another role to play... I will play it to perfection."

Ironically, the world-class spy who always had an elaborate plan for all kinds of contingency and who was so confident of playing the assigned role of father to perfection, finds himself at his wit's end when he actually has to take complete responsibility for his adopted daughter Anya. After he brings Anya home from the orphanage, he is shown poring over several parenting books to get a grasp on his role as father. By the end of the first episode, he concedes his mistake of underestimating the taxing responsibility of parenting, as he ruminates, "Do the parents of the world normally carry out such difficult missions all the time?"

As Loid Forger, he takes his role of parenting seriously. He understands that is normal for little Anya, who has been suddenly planted into a faux family of strangers, to feel disorientated. He puts in effort to make her feel at home by trying to understand things from her perspective.

He goes through a lot of trouble while preparing Anya to clear Eden Academy's entrance exam because the entire fate of Operation Strix hinges on her getting admission into the school. But when she clears the exam, he scoops her up in his arms in an instance of genuine fatherly pride and affection. He doesn't see Anya merely as a tool in his mission, but rather he gets emotionally involved in fostering her overall wellbeing. In the last episode of the first season, Loid articulates his experience of parenting, in which one can infer the authentic fatherly love that he feels for Anya:

Just because she's your child doesn't mean you can rule over her completely. You can't impose selfish expectations and disappointments toward your child. I sometimes can't understand what my daughter says or does, though. But I try to accept her as she is, even though I don't understand her, and I try to have a dialogue with her as much as possible.

Each member of the Forger family brings their own substantial burden of emotional baggage into their little apartment. Though they all refrain from unpacking these baggages for the fear of shattering the ephemeral moments of happiness and the fragile familial bonds that they have painstakingly nurtured, the baggages don't disappear, they remain very much there, taking up space and asserting their presence. The persistent presence of their emotional baggage serves as a poignant testimony to their painful past experiences and adversities. Despite the pain that it causes, they are still unable to let go of the burden of their painful past. Therefore, they don't open up to each other about their past, hiding their secret lives as spy, assassin and telepath, because of the fear of losing the Forger household, the only place that they have ever felt accepted and loved.

Conclusion

Amidst their endearing and affable demeanour, it becomes convenient to overlook the fact that all three of them are essentially lonely and exhausted individuals, trying their best to navigate through the challenges of life within a world scarred by conflict. Their mutual love and dependence enable them to carry on in their journeys of life in the war-torn world by soothing their broken spirits. Though the burden of their difficult pasts doesn't overwhelm the comedic and action-packed escapades they embark upon, it subtly yet consistently shapes their character development, resulting in moments of profoundly touching human vulnerability. Despite being a fake family in which all the members had implicitly agreed to maintain the façade for their individual interests, the Forger family had certainly forged for themselves a rare and precious bond in an uncertain and strife-riven world, which is worth protecting not just for the sake of the lofty ideal of world peace, but because it makes them genuinely happy and motivates them to become a better version of themselves.

It could therefore be concluded that Spy X Family's appeal derives from its poignant reminder that meaningful connections can be forged at any juncture of our lives, transcending the confines of conventional kinship. The anime adeptly underscores the notion that not all families will look alike, and regardless of whether it is fake or real, the most important criterion that should define a family is the authentic love that the members of a family must feel for one another. Central to the anime's message is its portrayal of families- whether found or real- as spaces of authentic care and unwavering affection. By emphasising that the essence of a family lies not in blood kinship but rather in the genuine emotional connection, Spy X Family implores its audience to reevaluate the institutionalised heteronormative family structure. As the traditional conceptualisation of family continues to evolve, Spy X Family's sensitive portrayal of the unconventional relationship dynamics of the Forger family offers a

timely reflection of these changes, inspiring us to acknowledge love as the defining factor of family structure.

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