

THE ROLE OF WOMEN IN JAPANESE LITERATURE  
AND THEIR INFLUENCE IN CULTURE

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Japanese culture has been expressed and beautifully described for many years through its early works of literature. Emphasizing their social norms, religion, traditions and unique values. The essences of their values and beliefs have been shown throughout the various types of literature. Through readings from the medieval time periods we read in class, I was very intrigued as to the role of a woman and it made me want to understand much more. The themes that spoke out to me the most were the portrayal of a women and the way they are expected to be. I will discuss the portrayal of women in three forms of literature, including a film we saw in class. My main focuses will be women's expectation of beauty, their roles in literature.

Women during the tenth century had a certain set of guidelines to follow. Many women were expected to be very well educated and talented as well as being exquisitely beautiful. They were taught to be educated and talented to best find a suitor of a higher class so that their family could marry into it and possibly give her father a role in court. Women at this time had really only one purpose, which was to serve their father, their husband and their son. However, it was not so easy to just be beautiful and talented, most of these women had to be completely pure and perfect. Any scars or missing teeth would bring them shame and become "useless". "The Lady Who Loved Insects" showed the independence of mind of a young girl in a rule-bounded society. She loved everything in its natural state and refused to change anything about herself. In this story, the main character breaks the social norm of the beauty concept of a woman. She talks about how terrible it is to be so hostile about insects because of their appearance and unappealing state. She goes on to say however that beautiful things such as butterflies can be poisonous and dangerous. She states, "Why do people make such fuss about butterflies and never

give a thought to the creatures of which butterflies grow? Natural form of a thing is always most important” She chose never to pluck a hair from her eyebrows nor blacken her teeth because she found it to be a dirty and disagreeable custom. Her parents often wanted her to be like other women and be beautiful, they would tell her things like, “If it gets out that you keep hairy caterpillars, you will be thought a disgusting girl and no one will want to know you” She would reply that she simply did not care for what other people thought of her and strongly believed in keeping things as they were at the beginning.

Women in Japanese literature are often viewed for their talent in literature and exquisite poetry. However most of these women were that of higher class. Women of high social status had plenty of time to spend reading and writing and gossiping every now and then. The best way I chose to describe women in literature was through Sei Shonagon's piece “The Pillow Book” Sei Shonagon was born around 966 and was married and divorced at the age of 25. During the Heian time period, women of high court did not have too many choices once divorced. Their top choices were to, find another suitor, join a buddhist convent or serve in court. Sei Shonagon decided to pursue a life in court, and became a lady in waiting to the Japanese Empress and served her for about seven years.

Shonagon’s works were exquisitely exceptional because of her collection of observation and her ability to freely discuss her thoughts and opinions with so much detail. She composed many sections of various lengths for this piece of literature. Many of them varying from diary entries, lists and personal reflections, three of her most popular categories. Throughout her pieces we can conclude that she was a very intelligent a brilliant woman who was composed with wit

and impatience making her so interesting to read. One of her sections included things that cannot be compared;

*Summer and winter. Night and day. Rain and sunshine. Youth and age. A person's laughter and his anger. Black and white. Love and hatred. The little indigo plant and the great philodendron. Rain and mist.*

*When one has stopped loving somebody, one feels that he has become someone else, even though he is still the same person.*

*In a garden full of evergreens the crows are all asleep. Then, towards the middle of the night, the crows in one of the trees suddenly wake up in a great flurry and start flapping about. Their unrest spreads to the other trees, and soon all the birds have been startled from their sleep and are cawing in alarm. How different from the same crows in daytime!*

Her unique ability to make lists and reflect in sensitive way of the charms and beauty of the world. She is able to be observant of the small things that are paid little attention to such as “unsuitable things”;

*“An old woman who eats a plum and, finding it sour, puckers her toothless mouth.*

*A woman of the lower classes dressed in scarlet trouser-skirt. The sight is all too common these days.*

*A handsome man with an ugly wife.”*

Her observations are uniquely presented and from time to time reacts some sort of laughter from the audience. Her humor and wit is one of her main attractions that make her pieces of literature so popular and interesting to read. Aside from that, her own personal reflections were ones that

were sincere and very important to her. She expressed how lonesome and boring it is to be part of the court and expresses herself freely. Other than when she is asked to write messages and poems for her Empress. As Sei Shonagon comes from a line of poets and literates she feels the pressure of making sure she honors her father through her poetry.

In “The Pillow Book,” she discusses her unhappiness of writing poems when she is told to do so. Coming from an excursion, the Empress expected a few poems written about the day, when none of her ladies had any, she showed concern. However Shonagon assured her that “one must do those things when one is in the right mood.” Here she demonstrates how tedious she has found her poetry to be and how she is not as easily inspired when she is expected to be. She goes on to say “I don’t see anything to be ashamed of. I have made up my mind only to make poems when I feel inclined to.” I liked this the most about her as a writer because she had a very independent mindset about herself and the way she wanted to be perceived and treated.

A work of literature that also interested me and made me wonder about a woman’s role in literature was, “The Tosa Diary” also know as “Tosa Nikki”. The Tosa Diary is said to be written by Tsurayuki Ki, although this was written by himself posing as a woman. He wrote, “diaries are things written by men, I am told. Nevertheless I am writing one, to see what women can do.” This diary was written in Hiragana which is known to be the writing of women. Men at this time period would keep journals to mark historic events and often wrote them in Chinese. However it seems that Tsurayuki kept this journal in Hiragana to best conserve the aesthetics of Japanese values and culture, specially in their poetry.

The Tosa Diary describes is a poetic diary of a 55 day journey from Tosa province to the city of Kyoto. It focuses on the journey of a governor and the rituals that take place when one is

being replaced. They celebrate and have feasts while on their journey all together from lower to upper class. It is clear in his entries that there are differences between social ranks, however in this case, these social status did not prevent the lower class from celebrating a new governor. In a cultural perspective, the former governor and the new governor exchange their best wishes and promote to each other good fortune. Aside from this, the author describes the grievance of everyone on the ship as they mourn the loss of a young girl. They talk about how unfortunate it is that this young girl left Kyoto and that it was a shame she would not be returning with the rest of them. A poem was written for the memory of the young girl; “ Kyoto bound, our thoughts are heavy yet. with grief for one who shall never return” As they travel on their journey home, they have a constant reminder of the truth and long to return to the city of Kyoto. Many filled with thoughts and so many feelings unsaid, “no courier have we, and though with heavy hearts we leave- perhaps they’ll never know we grieved” However, it is said that the young girl in this story is the governor’s daughter herself.

Throughout their long journey they encounter dangers like pirates and high tides, causing them to make various stops and seek refuge, prolonging their journey even more. Many attempt to sing songs and have laughs to help them feel easy at heart. The author tends to describe their journey with a poem at ever harbor they reach and tells us how dreadful it was to have pirates approach them and endanger them. All together they being to pray for protection and offer what they can to please the gods. One of the items offered was a mirror;

*“I have two eyes, but only one mirror. I shall give this mirror to the god.’ He threw the mirror into the waves, and as it sank, ( a loss indeed!) the sea suddenly became as smooth as the face of the mirror”*

Happy to be safe and closer to Kyoto, the boat is filled with both joy and grief. Many compose poems of the joy it is to be so close to their destination while some still express their grief;

“when one, whose home is here, has not returned. How sad to see these new young pines.”

The author continues to narrate and express the thoughts and sorrows of this journey and ends the diary with the thought of memories one cannot forget, many which may cause him pain but that he cannot write them down because they are too many. He leaves us with no more to say. As I read this the first time, I imagined a very humble and educated woman writing this story, specially to read someone grieve so much for the loss of a child. I would not have imagined a man to have written this. The difference between the two literatures “The Pillow Book” and “The Tosa Diary” besides their gender are their structural writing. While Shonagon has a set of categories to write to, Tsurayuki simply narrates and shares his experience on his journey. We find similarities in both works through their sharing of poetry and daily reflections. In my opinion however, the best piece of work was that of Sei Shonagon's because of unique categories and eagerness to be her own self and self driven

All that I have discussed has been the outcome of my experience taking this class and learning to appreciate Japanese culture. More importantly, this has been a chance for me to share my favorite pieces of literature along with gathering more information of the role of women in the tenth century. What I found was very interesting and sincerely something I enjoyed learning about.

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