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Japanese Literature in Translation

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The Theme of Love

An insurmountable number of Japanese literature pieces are exclusively written by Japanese men, mainly by upper-class citizens, court officials, or religious figures, like monks. More often than not, these stories include themes of honor and morality, spirituality or religion, life lessons, mythology, and many more.  Many male authors also write about their own lives or travels through the use of journals, which gives the reader an idea of what that time period in Japan was like for men. However, it is somewhat rare to read a book that openly describes the lifestyle of women in Japan from the view of a woman. During the Heian period, many notable pieces of literature were written by women instead of men, for instance, *The Tale of Genji*, which is considered one of the first novels ever written. Ordinarily, the Japanese culture and society is often considered very secretive and detached; however, love arises as a common theme in many ancient Japanese literature pieces, especially those written by women. Female authors like Murasaki Shikibu, Sei Shonagon, and Ono no Komachi from the Heian period used love as a common theme in their literary and poetic pieces, fiction and nonfiction, to reflect on and to communicate the situations and expectations that were placed on women during that time.

One of the most influential Japanese tales ever written is that of *The Tale of Genji* by Murasaki Shikibu, which includes phenomenal insight into the court life during the Heian time, especially that of women. Murasaki Shikibu uses the character of Genji, a beautiful and lustful prince, to describe the different interpretations of what he considers love, and vice-versa; she uses love as a recurring theme in her story to delineate the character of Genji, which reflects on the characteristics and belief of men in her eyes (Keen 1955). During the course of the story, Genji takes on a multitude of female lovers, and claims to love them all for different reasons; to the readers this seems like a very inconsiderate and selfish exploitation of these women. Margaret Child’s, a professor in Japanese literature writes, “...romantic love is frequently associated with the impulse to nurture someone who is weak or frail” (pg 2, 1999); this psychological aspect of love may have been what drove Shikibu to illustrate Genji in the way that she did. Shikibu purposefully used the vulnerability of the women from Tale of Genji to perhaps attract Genji’s attention; it is not just their physical beauty what attracts him. It is through the reader's’ empathy for those women, however, that Shikibu uses Genji’s polygamistic interpretation of love against him and therefore against the male sex; the reader comes to resent Genji for his cruelty, which is perhaps very similar to a situation that occurred in Murasaki Shikibu’s own life. The reader comes to understand that women in the Heian period were given almost no voice, no opportunity to speak for themselves, to resist an advance or give consent, or to refuse a man in any way; this, we come to learn, is a normal occurrence in Heian court-life (Childs 1999, Keene 1955, Murasaki 1985).

Shikibu includes in her story both the male and female interpretation of love through her female characters, such as Yugao, Fujitsubo, and Lady Murasaki. While these are only some of the women that Genji becomes involved with, each are “loved” by him for different reasons, yet they share similar feelings of love towards him. For example, when Genji becomes involved with Yugao, he knows next to nothing about her, but swears his love for her still; this blind lust is perhaps Shikibu’s personal vendetta against the shallowness of man. With Fujitsubo, Genji shares an interesting affair due to the fact that she is his father’s concubine; through this form of “love” Shikibu identifies the selfishness of men through Genji and how the wishes of these women go ignored. Another example of the vulnerability that is involved in love is through Genji’s interactions with his lover Aoi, whom he only shows strong effective for after she becomes weak from childbirth (Childs pg 3, 1999). It seems expected of women during the Heian period to show vulnerability, as none of the women in *The Tale of Genji* show independence or strength, and it is only through their shyness, weaknesses, and their beauty that they come to be loved by Genji. One of the most crucial characters in the story, who seems the strongest and yet the most tormented, is Lady Murasaki who Genji seems to honestly swear a sincere love to. The way in which Shikibu illustrates Genji’s love for Murasaki suggests that he truly loves her, more deeply than any of his past loves. However, Genji’s actions portray different intentions, and Lady Murasaki meets her end at the hands of a broken heart; it is through this character that the reader feels the greatest connection to Murasaki Shikibu herself, as it seems to be a possible reflection of a similar situation in which Shikibu was as powerless as Lady Murasaki (Keene 1955, Murasaki 1985).

Another piece that was written by Murasaki Shikibu is an account of her life as a lady of the court through a diary which she kept throughout. In her diary, she reflects on what is expected of women, including herself, and how their lives are controlled and affected by the men who govern them. Love is included in her diary less frequently than in her stories, and in different ways. For instance, a part of her diary includes the difficulties that came with birthing a child and the great love and care that was provided to the queen; at one point during the time that the Queen was ill, Her Majesty’s major dommo fed her himself, which seems to have been a very rare sight during that time. The act of a man serving a woman seems very surprising, but through the diary Shikibu includes situations in which the men reciprocate a love for women that is almost totally unmatched in The Tale of Genji. However, at one point Shikibu illustrates her own thoughts regarding the court nobles who seemed to look down on them, saying, “...all the young nobles of the present day ar...only indulgent pleasure-seekers...” (Keene pg 152, 1955). It seems that while some men act very kindly towards the women, others are very rude and inconsiderate; Shikibu seems to take on a very negative and pessimistic opinion of most men she has come across; her inclusion of love seems to be growing in cynicism.

In another section of her diary, instead of writing about the activities going on at the palace, she writes about herself and reflects on the solitude that she finds herself in. Shikibu describes her loneliness and how, “[she has] no man who will look out for [her] future..” (Keene pg 153, 1999) At one point, Murasaki Shikibu questions whether or not it is her “worldly mind” that is the cause of her loneliness; this is a reflection on how the literate women of that time often go unsought by men; they will not love someone who is superior to them intellectually, and this again plays into the vulnerability and weakness of women from the Heian period. The despondent attitude that she has about relationships and love is very easy to identify through her diary as well as in *The Tale of Genji*; her thoughts about love remain heavy-hearted.

Another very well known author, Sei Shonagon, included love in many of her pieces of literature, including her most famous *The Pillow Book.,* which was kept as a sort of diary while she was a lady of the court. Sei Shonagon, in respect to Murasaki Shikibu, included love in her “diary” more as an irritation or a burden, rather than longing for it or reflecting on a past love; Sei Shonagon also takes a more comedic approach, whereas Shikibu is very serious and emotional. One thing that Sei Shonagon is recognized for is for creating lists of things in *The Pillow Book*, and under such a list she includes what is expected of a male lover; expectations of men are rarely read about from the point of a woman, and the specifics of her entry suggest that she often considers these expectations. For instance, Shonagon mentions that a man who speak of an old lover quickly becomes very irritating, as well as when he departs in the morning; should he fumble around with his clothes and belongings, a woman “...instead of experiencing the feelings of regret proper to such an occasion, one merely feels irritated at his clumsiness,” (Keene pg 138, 1955). Shikibu seems to project an air of cynicism through her writings about the expectations of a male lover, but at times she also writes in a manner that seems very dreamy. For example, in one list which addresses depressing things, she depicts a scene in which a woman hears a tapping on her door, in which a maid answers and while the woman waits, her heart beats wildly as she expects it to be her lover; instead, a different name is heard, and the woman resigns herself to sorrow. Through descriptions like this, Sei Shonagon seems to present the idea that she has experienced this first hand, and while she seems a very comedic and witty woman, her feelings of loneliness are regarded quietly. In opposition to the seriousness and sadness that is included in pieces written by Shikibu, Sei Shonagon seems to be that of a strong woman who knows what she wants and likes, and what she doesn’t. In the analysis, Value of Vulnerability by Maggie Childs, she addresses this characteristic saying, “Women were sometimes able to fend off unwanted suitors if they avoided appearing vulnerable. By behaving as if inert, a woman could convey such insensitivity that a man's ardor might be dampened.” Due to the fact that vulnerability is what might have led to the crumbling of a relationship in Murasaki Shikibu’s life, Sei Shonagon seems the opposite; a stronger woman in control of her life, and in order to prevent herself from being taken advantage of or being heartbroken, she takes a firm, and almost insensitive stance regarding the likes of men (Childs 1999, Keene 1955).

The final female author, Ono no Komachi, is well known for her waka poetry during the Heian period, which very often included love as a literary theme. Unlike Murasaki Shikibu or Sei Shonagon, Komachi writes about love itself as a story through her poetry and in chronological order. Another difference between the authors is that Komachi talks about dreams, specifically her own, and how she longs to be loved; instead of talking about her loneliness, for instance, like Murasaki Shikibu. Komachi uses a writing style that suggests love is a wonderful, longing feeling that she relishes feeling. For example, one poem Komachi writes includes the lines, “Longing for him, I fell asleep,” and “I wear my robes inside out,”; the latter quote is a reference to the belief that when one does this, they will dream about their lover (Cote pg 80, 2008). Specifically, Komachi uses dreams almost as a portal to achieve love, and she comes to rely on her dreams to see her lover, instead of relying on the real world. Komachi also describes the connection of lust and desire, as well as the secretive nature of their relationship, which is often excluded from the literature of Murasaki Shikibu and Sei Shonagon. Komachi’s reflection that the love between men and women in court-life often must be hidden from people in order to maintain status, or privacy, and that is especially true to those who are from different social status. The court system of the Heian period was more status based, and very often people from the court, like Ono no Komachi, participated in the art and game of love, having had many liaisons throughout her career (Cote, 2008).

Through the different female authors of the Heian period, including Murasaki Shikibu, Sei Shonagon, and Ono no Komachi, readers and historians are able to imagine the life for women during the Heian period. These women used writing styles very different to men, including emotional passages that projected their inner thoughts and feelings, while also providing a steady guide to what was expected of them, especially in court life. Each woman included love in some form or another in their different pieces of literature; some, like Murasaki Shikibu, regard love as very lonely, heartbreaking, and sad, although she seems to long for it in her own life. In opposition, Sei Shonagon takes a more firm stance in her own life at the court, and does not allow herself to be controlled by men, as much as possible, and addresses love as something that can be very good and uplifting, but men themselves are often very clumsy or irritating. Finally, Ono no Komachi, a poet during the Heian period, talked about loving someone through a dream, and how she herself might have dreamt of a particular lover, and the longing for them; her writing style seems to suggest a more lustful take on love as a theme. All of these writers, while unique in their stories, described their personal lives in the court, or included a description of the lives of women in their stories by illustrating the inclusion of love and how it affects men and women in different ways.

Resources

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Keene, D. (1955). *Anthology of Japanese literature, from the earliest era to the mid-nineteenth century*. New York: Grove Pr.

* Shikubu Diary
* The Pillow Book

Shikibu, M. (1985). The tale of genji. New York, NY: Random House, Inc.